GREGORY OF NYSSA (c. 332—395)

Bibliography

______, *The Life of Macrina*
______, *The Life of Moses*
______, *On the Soul and Resurrection*

______, “Gregory of Nyssa,” in Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*


QUOTATIONS

Gregory of Nyssa:

“Your breasts are better than wine, and the scent of your perfume is better than all spices. Your name is perfume poured out.” *Song of Songs* 1:2b-3a

“Upon my bed at night/I sought him whom my soul loves./ I sought him and did not find him…I will rise, then, and go about the city…/And I will seek him whom my soul
loves...Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go...  

_Poem of Songs_ 3

(In the following, human “virtues” or excellences are “spices.”) “wisdom, temperance, justice, courage, prudence, and the like; and each different individual assumes a different scent as he is touched with [these spices] in accord with his own power and choice.” Gregory, _Song_, Homily I

In _Poem_ 1:12b “the Bride, referring to the Bridegroom says: My spikenard gave off his scent and by this she means that her bundle of spikenard exudes ‘the aroma of Christ’ (2 Cor. 2:15ff.) and so captures within her and for her ‘the scent of that transcendent and unapproachable grace.’” R.A. Norris, “The Soul Takes Flight: Gregory of Nyssa and the _Poem of Songs_,” _The Anglican_, Vol 25, No. 2, October 1996.

“What does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it? What is now recounted seems somehow to be contradictory to the first theophany, for then the divine was beheld in light but now he is seen in darkness. Let us not think that this is at variance with the sequence of things we have contemplated spiritually. Scripture teaches by this that religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be contrary to religion is darkness, and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light. But as the mind progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is uncontemplated.

“For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, _No one has ever seen God_, thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature.” _Life of Moses_

_Stanley H. Block, M.D._

_The closing down of our awareness shuts us off from our essence._ With closed-down senses, we are separate from our Source and all existence.” in _Come to Your Senses_, xi.

_Sarah Coakley:_

“How can external sense and ordinary cognition be purged or purified so that the original image of God in the human being can begin to be refurbished?” _Spiritual Senses_, 41.
“Working with outer sense is precisely the means of its transformation and purification.” 
*Spiritual Senses*, 41.

“[there is] a capacity for the sense organs to develop from ‘small-souled’ to ‘large-souled’ apprehensions; yet also, the temptation to completely close down the spiritual senses…our perceptual capacities have labile and transformative possibilities, but ones that not all activate—whether through sin, laziness, blindness or philosophical obtuseness.” *Spiritual Senses*, 48.

“[there is a] gradual enrichment of Gregory’s perception of bodily capabilities, stressing increasingly the transformation effected by the incarnation, the resurrection and the Spirit…an explicit discussion of the progression of sensuality from baseness to Christlikeness…It is the doctrine of Christ that is increasingly at stake, whereas the spiritual senses are the epistemological means of progressively internalizing that doctrine.” *Spiritual Senses*, 54.

“That our very acts of visual perceiving and sensual response might be affected by our moral fibre, our spiritual maturity, or our depths of scriptural engagement, now seems…not an impossible line of new philosophical investigations…a live philosophical and theological option for today.” *Spiritual Senses*, 55.

I SAW HIM STANDING

Under the dark trees, there he stands,
there he stands; shall he not draw my eyes?
I thought I knew a little
how he compels, beyond all things, but now
he stands there in the shadows. It will be
Oh, such a daybreak, such bright morning,
when I shall wake to see him
as he is.

He is called Rose of Sharon, for his skin
is clear, his skin is flushed with blood, his body lovely and
exact; how he compels
beyond ten thousand rivals. There he stands,
my friend, the friend of guilt and helplessness,
to steer my hollow body
over the sea.

The world is full of masks and fetishes,
what is there here for me? are these like him?
Keep company with him and you will know;
no kin, no likeness to those empty eyes.
He is a stranger to them all, great Jesus.
What is there here for me? I know
what I have longed for. Him to hold
me always.

18th century Welsh poem by Ann Griffiths, translated by Rowan Williams
Gregory of Nyssa

Vocabulary and Summary of Themes

Gregory’s *Life of Moses* and his commentary on the *Song of Songs* are examples of allegorical interpretation. Allegory is energized by *eros*, desire. There is an unbridgeable ontological gap between human beings and God. So: unceasing seeking follows from this unbridgeable gap.

Whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God, because he is himself absolute virtue. Since, then, those who know what is good by nature desire participation in it, and since this good has no limit, the participant’s desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless.

Gregory concludes: “The perfection of human nature consists perhaps in the very growth in goodness.” And this can be a behavioral model for us: how to habituate ourselves to be receptive to what we might call the “pure teaching” that comes from the action of God on our inner experience and reality, on our soul. But Gregory discovered that God activates our affective, spiritual, and intellectual development. For him this happened through *epektasis*=stretching forward, eternal progress. There is no stasis ever in God. Spiritual growth also happens through *theoria*=contemplation of intellectual truths.

*Theologia*=contemplation of things divine: it is possible to achieve some knowledge of God. God is truth itself and it is the primary function of our mind to know the one God. “The judgment of the mind is good and has been given to us for a good end, namely, the perception of God; but it operates only as far as it can.” What is the existential meaning of thinking about God? *You are growing in your relationship with God as you think through what you can come to know about God.* There’s an entrainment of your affections and your thoughts; you’re becoming sensitized to the existence of divine, spiritual realities. Essential to this process is *proairesis*=your own choice, free will. In a sense, spirituality can be summed up as intentionality. And God will lead you through an *akoluthia*, a sequence of connections, following closely the order of the historical figures=the sequence of the development of virtue, *Life of Moses*, p. 63, tailor-made to train you up to God’s reality rather than the world’s reality. This is equivalent to the Christian process of discernment. The vision of God is defined as a “continuous following of God.”

But meanings of God’s reality are always *ainigma*, hidden puzzles. So: you’re not getting more and more light. Instead, your journey is a penetration by means of love into the darkness of not-knowing, just as Moses on Mr. Sinai penetrated into the cloud where God is. This is an *apophatic*, as contrasted with *kataphatic*, experience. Gregory’s is a kind of pilgrimage spirituality. Our desires are affirmed, but never satisfied. Stretching ourselves out toward virtue & perfection, we become God’s servant and friend. Gregory is famous for the idea of *apokatastasis* of “final restoration”=

“eternal salvation.” (Moses, p. 73). The last sentence of his commentary on the Song of Songs would seem to express this hope:

When all [people] look to the same goal of desire and become one and no evil remains in anyone, God will be everything to everyone, to those who through unity with one another are united by participation in the good in Christ Jesus our Lord, to Whom be the glory, and the might for ever and ever. Amen. (Cf. Life of Moses, p. 168, note 102)

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The Kataphatic and Apophatic Ways

From the Greek:

Phaino=Bring to light, cause to appear.

Kata=preposition with genitive* or accusative case, denotes motion from above, downwards, also in accordance with.

Apo= preposition usually with genitive, denotes from, away from, asunder, away, off, removal of.

Kataphasis=Affirmation, affirmative proposition

Kataphaino=Declare, make known, become visible, appear, make manifest, make clear

Apophasis=denial, negation

Apophaino=show forth, display

*Genitive case denotes relationship of possessor or source

APOPHATIC:

The via negativa emphasizes God’s radical otherness, unbridgeable gulf between God and creatures. Thus God is best known by negation, elimination, forgetting, unknowing, without images and symbols, and in darkness. God is “not this, not that.” All images, thoughts, symbols, etc., must be eliminated, because, as St. John of the Cross points out, “all the being of creatures compared with the infinite being of God is nothing...Nothing which could possibly be imagined or comprehended in this life can be a proximate means of union with God.” When Gregory of Nyssa’s Moses enters into the
dark cloud where God is, his experience could be called *apophatic*. The 14th century English text *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a work of *apophatic* spirituality *par excellence*, although it uses *kataphatic* imagery to speak of the *apophatic* experience.

**KATAPHATIC:**

The *via affirmativa*, or *via positiva* emphasizes God’s presence in all things, the doctrine of the incarnation, sacramental theology. There is a similarity between creatures and God: creation bears God’s traces, God’s image. Thus God can be known through creatures, images, words, symbols, because God has manifested Godself in creation and salvation history. Takes the incarnation seriously: because Christ is God’s real symbol, the icon of God, God is really present in a positive way.