

# Just How Special Are Humans?

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## NATURE MAKES AN ASCENT FROM THE LOWER TO THE HIGHER: GREGORY OF NYSSA ON HUMAN DISTINCTIVENESS

by John Behr 

*Abstract.* This essay explores the way in which early Christian writers held an eschatological understanding of what it is to be human, something that is to be attained, through the transformation of death and resurrection, and something that requires our assent. In this context, the article offers a new reading of the late fourth-century work entitled *On the Human Image of God* (otherwise known in English as *On the Making of Man*) by Gregory of Nyssa. It argues that Gregory structured his text in parallel to the three parts of Timaeus' speech in Plato's dialogue. The resulting picture sees creation as a dynamic ascent from the lower forms of life to the higher, a growth which is recapitulated in the life-span of each human being, and also the growth of the human race into the totality of human beings that together constitute the human being in the image of God, the body of Christ.

*Keywords:* creation; eschatology; evolution; Gregory of Nyssa; human nature; image of God (imago dei); Plato Timaeus

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John Behr is the Regius Professor of Humanity at the University of Aberdeen, previously having served as Dean at St Vladimir's Seminary, New York; he is also a part-time Professor at Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands; e-mail: john.behr@abdn.ac.uk.

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The writings of early Christians are perhaps some of the most provocative regarding what it is to be human. For instance, while being marched, under guard, from Antioch to Rome to be martyred there, Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to the Roman Christians urging them not to interfere with his impending end:

Birth-pangs are upon me. Allow me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die. . . . Allow me to receive the pure light; when I shall have arrived there, I will be a human being. Allow me to follow the example of the passion of my God. (*Rom.* 6)

Not yet born, not yet living, and, moreover, not yet human, Ignatius sees his impending martyrdom as an opportunity to be conformed to Christ and his passion, so being born into life as a human being. The background for this is the Gospel of John and the intertextual play that it makes with Genesis: both texts begin with the same words—“in the beginning”—yet Christ’s final word on the cross in the Gospel of John is “it is finished, completed, perfected,” plays upon the switch in mood of the verbs used in Gen. 1: after making heaven and earth, God speaks everything into existence with an imperative—“Let there be”—until he comes to the human being, for which the voice switches to the subjunctive: “Let us make the human being according to our image and according to our likeness” (Gen 1:26; cf. Behr 2019, 194–244). Having set the stage, as it were, God deliberates and announces his own particular project, the particular work of God. That this “project” is completed upon Calvary is indicated, unwittingly, by Pilate when, before sending him to be crucified, he presents Christ to the crowd with the words: “Behold the human being” (19:5). The sabbath during which Christ is in the tomb is the “great sabbath” (cf. 19:31), when God finally rests, his work now complete.

If we follow the main lines of Christian reflection thereafter, especially the Chalcedonian definition (451 CE), the one Jesus Christ, as proclaimed by the apostles in accordance with Scripture, is not simply both what it is to be God and what it is to be human, defined otherwise, but rather defines what it is to be both, and does so together, in one *hypostasis* or *prosopon*, laying down his life in love for others. While we have come into existence without choice (“nobody asked me if I wanted to be born!”) and as mortal, the cross of Christ invites us to turn that mortality inside-out, as it were, so that it becomes the path for changing the ground of our existence from necessity and mortality into freedom and self-offering love—a voluntary birth into life as a human being, as Ignatius puts it. If this is what it is to be human, then, it is not something which could be commanded into existence by a divine imperative, but only projected with a subjunctive, awaiting our own “let it be.” Moreover, if Christ also shows us what it is to be God in this way, then we are invited to realize our high calling: “I say

you are gods, but you will die like human beings” (Ps. 81:7–8 LXX; cited by Christ, John 10:34).

One can find such ideas consistently expressed in the early (meaning the first two or three) centuries of Christianity. As Christian theology developed in the fourth century, we can begin to see these ideas taken further. One of the most interesting is the work of Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God* (formerly known as *On the Making of Man*), written between the death of his brother Basil (Sept 378) and sent to his other brother, Peter, as an Easter gift in 379 (Behr 2023). Ostensibly written to supplement Basil’s *Hexameron* (treating the six days of creation, but not reaching to the creation of the human being), Gregory does much more: it is in fact (as I argue in a forthcoming new critical edition, translation, and introduction), a reworking of Plato’s *Timaeus*—the most important work in the ancient world on cosmology and the place of the human being within it—providing a comprehensive cosmology and anthropology, drawing upon the traditions of classical philosophy and earlier theology, from Anaxagoras to Origen, and inspiring later writers such as Maximus the Confessor and John Scotus Eriugena. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, the main character, Timaeus, gives long speech describing the creation of the world and the human being, in three parts: first describing “what is crafted by intellect” (*Tim.* 47e4), that is, the world as seen in terms of its divine order, brought into being by the best of all makers wishing to impart the best of all things; but then, second, Timaeus points out that the world is in fact of mixed birth, and so he must also “give an account of necessity” or “the straying cause” (*Tim.* 48a2–3), and how reason persuades necessity to come to its proper end; and, finally, he brings these two accounts together under “a final head” (*Tim.* 69a7–b12), describing in medical or anatomical terms the constitution of the human being. Gregory’s treatise is similarly divided.

#### ON THE HUMAN IMAGE 1–15

Gregory opens his treatise by describing the world as being a dynamic interplay between the various elements all held together in tension: “all things appearing in the creation are the offspring of rest and motion, brought to genesis in accordance with the divine will” (*De hom.* 1.2). For Gregory, as he makes clear in his companion piece, his own *Hexameron*, God’s act of creation is instantaneous, unfolding in time in due order and sequence. Although heaven and earth were “finished” (Gen 2.1), all things having “arrived at their end,” while rhapsodizing about the beauty of the world Gregory notes that “there was no one to share it” (*De hom.* 1.5), for “the human being had not yet occupied its place in the world of beings” (*De hom.* 2.1). Only having prepared the world as a royal lodging for a king, does God “present” or “introduce” the human being into the world

(*De hom.* 2: ἀναδείκνυσιν, εἰσάγει). The human being is also made in a “two-fold” manner, the earthly blended with the divine, so as to have enjoyment of each (*De hom.* 2.2). The human being is the only one about whom God took counsel prior to creation, sketching out in advance towards what archetype the human was to come into being (*De hom.* 3): that is, the human beings are not simply made, but has a *telos* set before them.

This goal, Gregory continues, is the exercise of royalty; but it is not, however, the “advantages” of having a self-governing soul, free will, and a body whose “very form” is adapted for “royalty” that themselves constitute the human distinctiveness, but rather that these enable the exercise of virtue, and it is in this virtue that they are “living images” of God (*De hom.* 4). Certainly, in possessing “intellect and word,” human beings are like the divine, but as “God is love,” if love is absent “the whole stamp of the image is transformed” (*De hom.* 5.2). Moreover, if the very form of the body is adapted for the exercise of royalty, it does so in a paradoxical manner: its very weakness, compared to other animals, demands that rulership be exercised through cooperation, rather than dominion, of its subjects (*De hom.* 7). The form of the body, in particular the upright posture of the human being and their possession of hands, is, for Gregory, a particular mark of a rational being (*De hom.* 8.2).

However, before explaining this further, Gregory catches himself (in a detour paralleling one that Timaeus makes at this point in his speech): before examining the structure of the body, he should really describe the soul, and how Moses’s account in Gen. 1 describes an “evolution” of the soul: first the plants sprouting up from the earth, then the irrational animals, and only then the human being. By this order, Gregory suggests, “Moses reveals a certain doctrine about hidden things and secretly delivers the philosophy concerning the soul” which is “that the vital and animating power is contemplated in three divisions”: the first, simply the faculty of growth and nutrition, which is called “the vegetative,” for it is seen in plants; the second includes also, in addition to the faculty of growth and nutrition, the ability to regulate sense-perception, such as we find in irrational animals; while “the perfect embodied life is seen in the rational, I mean the human, nature, which is both nourished and endowed with sense-perception and partakes of reason and is ordered by intellect” (*De hom.* 8.4). Gregory’s conclusion from this is that “reasonably, nature makes an ascent, as it were by steps, I mean the various properties of life, from the lower to the perfect” (*De hom.* 8.7). Only having analyzed the development or evolution of the soul, does Gregory return to the hands, pointing out that it is because humans have hands that their mouths can be fashioned for speaking words, as befits a “rational animal,” rather than for grazing grass or tearing meat (*De hom.* 8.8).

Gregory’s emphasis on the body continues in the following chapters. Since God, he says,

has bestowed upon our moulded figure a certain godlike grace, by implanting in the image the likeness of his own good gifts, for this reason he gave, of his munificence, the other good gifts to human nature; yet it is not strictly right to say that he “gave” [δέδωκεν] of intellect and practical wisdom, but that he “gave a share” [μετέδωκε] of them, adding to the image the proper adornment of his own nature. (*De hom.* 9.1)

It is striking that, again, for Gregory, intellect and practical wisdom are not the locus of the image of God in the human being; here it is “that which is moulded” (the *πλάσμα*, an allusion to Gen. 2:7) that is the image. It is into this image that God implants the likeness of his own good gifts, which in turn merit the further gifts, or rather not a gift of but a share in intellect and reason, adding to the image the distinctive adornment of the divine nature itself. But even this inestimable share would remain ineffectual without the body, for as Gregory immediately continues: “since the intellect is a thing intelligible and incorporeal, its grace would have been incommunicable and isolated, without its movement being made manifest by some contrivance,” that is, this “instrumental formation” that, like the vocal organs struck by a plectrum, indicates by the sound it produces “the movement within” (*De hom.* 9.1). And so, “since the intellect produces the music of reason by means of this instrumental construction within us, we have become rational [λογικοί γεγόναμεν],” which would not have happened had our mouths been shaped in such a way as to supply the needs of the body rather than being “well-adapted for the service of reason” (*De hom.* 10.1). It is, then, the body in its very structure, and its weakness, that enables human beings to “become rational,” manifesting the divine gifts in which they share, a point which is picked up dramatically at the end of the treatise.

The activity of this bodily instrument is also “two-fold,” allowing the intellect to express itself and communicate its movements, but also allowing for all the impressions which flow in to the “inner receptacle” through the senses, as entrances into a city, while the intellect “distinguishing and examining each of the things that enters, stores them in their proper departments of knowledge” (*De hom.* 10.3–4). In its own nature, the intellect must, therefore be something other than the senses (*De hom.* 11.1), but is itself incomprehensible: “‘Who has known the intellect of the Lord?’ asks the apostle; and I ask further, who has understood his own intellect?” (*De hom.* 11.2). But this should not be surprising, he adds, for made in the image of God, it lacks nothing that is perceived in the archetype, so that if one of the aspects perceived in the divine nature is incomprehensibility, this too will be found in the image (*De hom.* 11.3–4).

In the following chapters, Gregory enters into a long digression about the place of the intellect, arguing that it is present throughout the body, when each of the parts is in its proper or natural state, but is alienated from those parts which are no longer obedient to it (his discussion ranges from

bodily accidents producing a blunting of the rational faculty to spontaneous movements such as yawning). It is in this overturning of order that Gregory sees “the genesis of evil”: if the mind is oriented towards God, it is beautified and in turn beautifies the body; but if it instead turns towards what in itself has no shape—matter—it becomes as shapeless as that to which it should have given order, receiving into itself “the shapelessness of matter” (*De hom.* 12.10).

In these first fifteen chapters, Gregory has presented us with a wholly positive picture of the human being as the image of God, the culmination of, and reason for, creation, whose body is adapted in its very structure for the exercise (through weakness) of kingly sovereignty, fashioned in such a way as to enable this animal to become rational, sharing in the intellect and reason that adorns the divine nature itself, and so to be the living image, decked out in virtue. But of whom is Gregory speaking?

#### ON THE HUMAN IMAGE 16–29

Gregory opens Chapter 16 by saying it is necessary to take up again the scriptural verse (Gen 1:26), for, although it says that the human being was created in the image and likeness of God, this is not in fact what we see: we see human beings sick, suffering, and dying. The conflict between what is stated in Scripture and the evidence of our eyes prompts Gregory to give a second account, just as Timaeus, in the second part of his speech, gave an account of “necessity” or “the straying cause.” Here, Gregory focusses on the difference between Gen. 1:27ab (“God made the human being, in the image of God made he him”) and 1:27c (“male and female made he them”), noting further that the final clause (1:27c) indicates a departure from the prototype, for in Christ Jesus there is not male and female (Gal. 3:28). What he has to say about male/female is indeed intriguing (perplexing, and the cause of much debate), but for the purpose of the question of human distinctiveness more important is Gregory’s specification that what differentiates the created human being from the uncreated prototype is that movement is at the very core of its being: “its very passage from non-being into being is a kind of movement and alteration of the non-existent being changed by the divine purpose into being” (*De hom.* 16.12). It is by this movement, and the alterability of the human will (similar to Timaeus’ “straying cause”) that Gregory, in this second part of his treatise, outlines the whole “economy,” in which human beings are brought, in time, to the fulness to which they were called from the beginning (or as Timaeus puts it: reason persuading necessity).

Most strikingly in these chapters, Gregory argues that the statement “God made the human being” does not in fact refer to Adam; he is introduced later in the narrative (*De hom.* 16.16). Rather “the indefinite character of the term” [of “human”] indicates, for Gregory, that the text

is not speaking of the particular but the universal, and so “we are led by the universal name of the nature to suppose something such as this, that by divine foreknowledge and power all humanity is included in the first formation” (*De hom.* 16.16). But, as God does not make anything indeterminate, each being made by him must have “some limit and measure” prescribed by the isdomm of God. And so, “the entire plenitude of humanity was included by the God of all, by his power of foreknowledge, as in one body,” and this, in turn, means that “the image is not in part of our nature,” but rather “extends equally to the whole genus,” as is shown by the fact that “the intellect is seated alike in all” (*De hom.* 16.16–17), that is, in both males and females alike, and in each and all. He then concludes this reflection on the pleromatic character of the human being created in the image this way:

The human being manifested together with the first formation of the world, and he who shall come to be after consummation of all, both likewise have this: they equally bear in themselves the divine image. For this reason the whole was called one human being, because to the power of God nothing has either passed or is to come, but even that which is looked for is held fast equally with the present by his all-embracing activity. The whole nature, then, extending from the first to the last, is a kind of single image of He Who Is. (*De hom.* 16.17–18)

This very strong understanding of the unity of all human beings—past, present, and future—as one human being is, again, an expression God’s instantaneous and comprehensive act of making which unfolds through its own sequence and order. Embracing all that would come to be, the human being “manifested” at the beginning, and the one who “comes to be after the consummation of all,” bear the divine image. Here, now we see the significance of the fact that to this point Gregory has *not* been speaking of Adam, the first particular human being in the Genesis narrative, but only appearing in its second chapter: Adam might be the first, but he is not the *archē*. The image of God in accordance with whom God makes the human being in Gen. 1.27 is, according to *De hom.* 16.7, Christ Jesus, the “Prototype.” Yet so too is the one who “comes to be” at the end, but then, “after the consummation of all,” in “the entire plenitude of humanity” foreseen by God from or in the beginning, the *archē*. Or, as von Balthasar more elegantly put it: “The total Christ is none other than the total humanity” (von Balthasar 1995, 87).

Gregory reiterates this point in a later chapter (*De hom.* 22), but also address the question of why, if the entire plenitude of human beings is embraced in the statement of Gen. 1.27ab, is this not realized all at once, but requires an extension of time:

With the plenitude of human beings, then, preconceived by the activity of foreknowledge, coming into life by means of this more animal form of

birth, God, who guides all things in a certain order and sequence—since the inclination of our nature to what is lowly (which he who beholds, equally with the present, what is to be before it happens) made this form of birth absolutely necessary for humanity—therefore also foreknew the time co-extensive with the formation of human beings: so that the extent of time should be adapted for the entrance of the predetermined souls, and that the flowing movement of time should then halt, when humanity is no longer produced by it; and when the genesis of human beings is completed, time should stop together with the end of it, and then should take place the reconstitution of all things, and with the changing of the whole, humanity should also be changed, from the corruptible and earthy to the impassible and eternal. (*De hom.* 22.5)

God's own work of making the human being in his image, is completed when, collectively, the fullness of the number of human beings is attained, marking the end of time and also "the reconstitution of all things." This "reconstitution of all things" is connected with the point that Gregory had made in the preceding chapter (*De hom.* 21), that as evil is a deprivation of the good, it is necessarily finite, and so, when the wayward movement of human beings has run its course then, necessarily (as it is always in movement), it would return to the good, but now with experienced discernment (knowing how to differentiate between good and evil), a higher state than mere knowledge. Gregory identifies this "restitution" with the mystery of "transformation" promised by Paul: "Behold I tell you a mystery: we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (1 Cor. 15:51–2), the "moment" and the "twinkling of an eye" designating "an instant of time," that limit "which has no parts or extension," and the transformation through the resurrection effecting a change so that "the weight of the flesh no longer weighs downwards nor does its burden hold them to the earth" and they can arise through the air, "caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall ever be with the Lord" (*De hom.* 22.6; 1 Thess. 4:17). So, he concludes, we must "wait the time necessarily co-extensive with human increase" (*De hom.* 22.7), as did the Patriarchs, who desired to see the good things and sought the heavenly homeland, but waited with patience and hope, for as the Apostle said "God having foreseen something better for us, that without us they would not be made perfect" (*De hom.* 22.7; Heb. 11:40).

In the remaining chapters of this second part of the treatise, Gregory deals with various sundry points that arise out of further reflection on the end and the transformation to be effected through the resurrection. One particular point of current discussion is the question of whether soul or body has priority (*De hom.* 28), with Gregory taking the position that "as the human being is one, consisting of soul and body, it is to be supposed that the principle of his constitution is one and common to both," so that "the whole human plenitude" can be affirmed "to have pre-existed in



the power of God's foreknowledge (according to the account given a little earlier)" (*De hom.* 29.1), just as "in the grain, or in any other seed, the whole form of the ear of corn is potentially included" (*De hom.* 29.3). The image of the seed, in which the fulness of the whole is already contained, but which only comes to its fullness by being sown in the earth—used by Paul to provide an account of the resurrection and final transformation (1 Cor. 15:35–54)—is something that Gregory uses repeatedly, and it points to the way in which the human soul and body are formed together. The threefold power of the soul, whose evolution Moses had narrated in Gen. 1, is recapitulated, according to Gregory, in the life span of each individual:

For just as the body proceeds from a very small original to the perfect state, so also the activity of the soul, growing in step with the subject, gains and increases with it. For in its first formation, first of all comes the power of growth and nourishment alone, as though some root buried in the ground, for the smallness of the one receiving does not admit of more; then, as the plant comes to light and shows it shoot to the sun, the gift of the sense-perception blossoms; and when at last it is ripened and has grown up to its proper height, the rational faculty begins to shine, just like some fruit, not all appearing at once, but by diligence growing with the perfection of the instrument, always bearing as much fruit as the power of the subject grants. (*De hom.* 29.8)

There is, once again, a proper order and sequence for the growth of both body and soul: nourished in the womb, when it is sufficiently grown it emerges, through parturition, into the world of sense-perception, and then, in this world, the new-born infant takes time to grow in stature of body and reasoning power of soul, and, further, to learn the discernment that is needed with regard to sense-perception (for what appears is duplicitous: things are not always what they seem). As such it is only with time that the power of the soul reaches perfection with the body. "Take heed to yourself" says Moses, and Gregory adds that in doing so "you will read, as in a book, the account of the works of the soul" (*De hom.* 29.9; Deut. 4:23). Finally, as the end of human beings in this world is to be placed in the earth, Gregory suggests that we can learn from what we see in agriculture: what is sown in the earth—"kernels of fruit and portions torn from roots, not deadened [by being deprived] of the vital power naturally residing in them, but preserving in themselves, hidden, indeed, but certainly living, the property of their prototype"—is surrounded by the earth, not in such a way as to give it life (for then even dead wood would grow), but rather such that it "makes manifest that which resides within them, nourishing by its own moisture, perfecting the plant" in all its dimensions (*De hom.* 29.11).

## ON THE HUMAN IMAGE 30

In the third and final part of the work, Gregory turns, just as did Timaeus in the third part of his speech, to a detailed medical account of the human being. He spends many pages exploring the anatomical arrangement and purposes of the parts of the body, until he pulls himself short, commenting that “our argument, however, has wandered far from the matters at hand, going deep into the works of nature” (*De hom.* 30.28). His purpose, he notes, alluding back to the concluding chapters of the second part of the work, was to show that “the seminal cause of our constitution is neither a soul without body, nor a body without soul, but that, from animated and living bodies a being, living and animated from the first, is generated, human nature receiving it to be cherished, like a nursling, with her own powers” so that it grows appropriately in each part, “for it immediately displays, by this artistic and scientific process of formation, the power of the soul interwoven with it, appearing at first somewhat obscurely, but afterwards increasing in radiance concurrently with the perfecting of the organism” (*De hom.* 30.29).

Gregory then compares this process to that of a sculptor: intending to produce the figure of an animal in stone, the sculptor first separates the stone from its quarry, then chips away the superfluous parts, proceeding through the various steps of the first outline, when even an inexperienced observer can conjecture what the final figure will be; and then working again at the material, till at last “producing in the material the perfect and exact form, he brings his art to its conclusion,” and what had been shapeless stone is now a perfect figure of a lion or a human, “not by the material being changed into the figure, but by the figure being wrought upon the matter” (*De hom.* 30.30). In the same way, Gregory proposes,

we say that the all-contriving nature taking from the kindred matter within herself the part that comes from the human being crafts the statue. And just as the form follows upon the gradual working of the stone, at first somewhat indistinct, but more perfect after the completion of the work, so also in the carving of the organism the form of the soul, by the analogy, is displayed in the substratum, incompletely in that which is incomplete, and perfectly in that which is perfect; but it would have been perfect from the beginning had nature not been maimed by evil. For this reason our sharing in that impassioned and animal-like genesis brings it about that the divine image does not shine forth immediately in the moulded figure, but, by a certain method and sequence, through those material and more animal-like properties of the soul, brings to perfection the human being. (*De hom.* 30.30)

What this “evil” is that has prevented the end result from being perfect from the beginning is not explained here by Gregory. But it is important to note that it is not “our nature” (as previous translators have rendered it) that has been “maimed,” which might be taken to refer to a “fall.” Rather

it is “nature” as the “all-contriving”—the active agent of the process of that which comes into being, as it has been frequently throughout the treatise (e.g., *De hom.* 8.4–7)—that is “maimed.” Moreover, as for Gregory “the genesis of evil” lies in the turning of intellect from the good to matter, receiving its shapelessness into itself rather than beautifying matter as “an image of an image” (*De hom.* 12.9–13); and as this has been played out across the second part of the treatise in terms of the waywardness of the inclination of the human will, learning discernment through experience so that it returns, in the end, to what it was made in the beginning, the *archē*. As such, if the analogy with sculpting is to be followed, then the “evil” which “maims” nature, such that the human being is not brought to perfection at the beginning but at the end, is more like the recalcitrance of that upon which nature is working, which in this case is the waywardness of the human will. Like Timaeus’ “straying cause,” it needs to be persuaded by intellect, and, once again (as in *De hom.* 10.1) it is through the material and animal-like aspects of our existence that the human being is perfected. Gregory concludes his work by exhorting his readers to “put off the old human being” and “put on the one being renewed in accordance with the image of God” (*De hom.* 30.33; Col. 3:9–10), and so, “let us all ascend [or ‘return’] to the divine grace in which God created the human being in accordance with the *archē* [κατ’ ἀρχῆς],” saying, “Let us make the human being in accordance with our image and likeness” (*De hom.* 30.34).

Gregory has presented us with a very sophisticated analysis of the human being. At its heart, thematically and structurally, it is an account of the condition in which we find ourselves, in which it is hard to see the truth of the scriptural affirmation that the human being is made in the image of God. Structuring his treatise in parallel with the *Timaeus*, Gregory has given, in the first part, a vision of the human being (Chapters 1–15); in the second part, an analysis of the prevision and provision of God with respect to the wavering inclination of our will, sketching out the economy, or the “anthropogony,” on the one hand, traced in the ascent of nature to the more perfect form of life, and, on the other hand, leading to the completion of the plenitude of the human race as the image of God, the total Christ, a process which requires, and is coextensive with, time itself, resulting in the final transformation heralded by Paul (chapters 16–29); and, in the third part, a description of how this economy is recapitulated in the life of each human being, from the seed being implanted in the womb and growing there through the power of nutrition, then coming into the world of sense-perception, where it continues to grow in both body and soul, learning discernment by experience and growing in virtue, yet needing to be exhorted to put away childish things, the old human being, and put on instead the one being renewed in accordance with the image of God.

*ON THOSE FALLEN ASLEEP*

For an indication of what is implied in the last lines of the work, where Gregory exhorts the reader to “put off the old human being” and put on “the one being renewed in accordance with the image of God,” we can turn briefly to his short work *On Those Who Have Fallen Asleep*. Here, Gregory deals extensively with the question of the role of death in life and the transformation that comes about through resurrection. Those displeased by this forthcoming transformation are, he says, like those who would prefer to remain as embryos in the womb, “for since the birth-pangs of death serve as the midwife assisting the birth of humans to another life, when they go forth to that light and draw in the pure Spirit they know by experience what a great difference there is between that life and the present one, while those left behind in this moist and flabby life, since they are simply embryos and not humans [ἔμβρυα ὄντες ἀτεχνῶς καὶ οὐκ ἄνθρωποι],” call the departed “unhappy” (*Mort.*, 47; ET 104–5). Just as with the newborn infant, so too “an eye is opened for him when he leaves what now afflicts him,” and also the other spiritual senses—hearing (quoting 2 Cor. 12:4), taste (Ps. 33:9), smell (2 Cor. 2:14), and touch (1 John 1:1)—“if these and such things are stored up for humans after the birth through death [τὸν διὰ τοῦ θανάτου τόκον], what is the purpose of grief, sorrow, and dejection” (*Mort.*, 47; ET 105)? According to Gregory:

nature always trains us by death [ἐμμελετᾷ τῷ θανάτῳ] and death has been made to grow together with life as it passes through time. For since life is always moved from the past to the future, and never does away with what follows afterwards, death is what always accompanies the life-giving activity by being united with it. For in past times every life-giving movement and activity certainly ceases. Since, then, impotence and inactivity are the special property of death, and certainly this always follows after the life-giving activity, it is not outside the truth to say that death has been woven together with life. . . . That is why, according to the words of the great Paul, “we die daily” (1 Cor. 15:31), not remaining constantly the same in the same house of the body, but from time to time we become different from something else, by addition and subtraction, being constantly changed as though to a new body. Why, then, are we astonished at death when the life existing through the flesh has been demonstrated to be its constant care and its training ground?. (*Mort.* 52–3; ET 107–8)

With regard to the final transformation that will be effected when our desire returns again to God, Gregory begins urging that “since the craftsman of the universe will at the appropriate time forge the lump of the body into a ‘weapon of good pleasure’ [Ps 5:13], ‘the breastplate of righteousness’ as the apostle says, and the ‘sword of the Spirit’ and the ‘helmet’ of hope, and the whole armor of God” [Eph. 6:14–17], love your own body [ἀγάπα τὸ ἴδιον σῶμα] according to the law of the apostle who says “no one has hated his own body” (*Mort.* 61–2; ET 113; cf. Eph. 5:29). But if, as Paul

says, we will have a “house not made by hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1), a worthy “dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22), how can that be described physically as our present state of embodiment can be?

Let no one describe to me the mark, shape, and form of that house not made with hands according to the likeness of the characteristic marks that now appear to us and that distinguish us from one another by special properties. For since it is not only the resurrection that has been preached to us by the divine oracles, but also that those who are being renewed by the resurrection pledged by divine scripture must be changed [cf. 1 Cor. 15:51], it is entirely necessary that what we shall be changed to has been hidden from absolutely everyone and is unknown, because no example of what is hoped is to be seen in the life we now live. (*Mort.* 62; ET 113)

The heaviness now characteristic of the body will be transformed for those “whose elements of their bodies have been changed to a more divine condition” so that they may rise in the air to meet the Lord (*Mort.* 62, ET 113–14; 1 Thess. 4:17). In this condition, “there will be one kind for all when all of us become one body of Christ, having been shaped by one characteristic mark” so that “since the divine image shines equally on all, as to what will become ours in the change of nature instead of such properties we shall appear to be something better than any thought can guess” (*Mort.* 63; ET 114). To say otherwise, and to try to hold on to our current experience of what it is to be human, is ultimately futile, for, again, “a human does not always remain the same as himself with respect to the form of his characteristic mark,” as he is “refashioned by the stages of life,” from infancy to maturity, to old age (*Mort.* 64; ET 114).

### CONCLUSION

What is particularly striking about these reflections of Gregory (and Ignatius and others before him) is the way in which the “truth” of what it is to be “human” is something that lies in the future, and it is an end (*telos*) towards which we must give our own “let it be.” Moreover, death is at the heart of this passage to being human. We see here points which have been picked up in modern philosophy, especially with Heidegger and, perhaps more profoundly, with Derrida: death is that which is uniquely my own: another can die for me, but that does not remove my death from me; someone else can put me to death, but it is still my death that I die. All I can do is to take it up myself, to die in one way and not another—it is a pure gift, as Derrida puts it (cf. Behr 2022, 5–21).

Also striking in the way in which this is played out by Gregory (and here he follows Irenaeus very closely) is how the pattern of growth which leads to the human being is one that is inscribed within Genesis 1 (from the plants to the animals to the one made in the image of God); within the

arc of the economy that leads from Adam to Christ (and from male/female to being human), where the body of Christ is in fact the entire pleroma of human beings; and, finally, how this is recapitulated in the life of each human being (from seed deposited in the womb, then born into the world of sense perception, then, finally, born into life as a human being through death). Indeed, one might say that the focus of Gregory's tripartite treatise (like that of Plato's *Timaeus*, where the two accounts are brought together under "one head") is in fact on the third part—the actual, empirical, formation and development of the human being, given in terms of the medical and anatomical knowledge of their days—for which the first two parts provide analyses of the teleological and material causalities at work. Yet perhaps there is something in the idea that the life-span of the human individual, finding "completion" at the end, recapitulates the life-span of the human race, as traced by evolutionary biology and psychology. As Mary LeCron Foster puts it, "both biological evolution and the stages in the child's cognitive development follow much the same progression of evolutionary stages as that suggested in the archaeological record" (LeCron Foster 1993, 386).

Finally, perhaps the most arresting point of Gregory's understanding of what it is to be human is that the distinctiveness of the human is not spelled out in terms of the possession of intellect or a particular bodily form (even though these play a part in Gregory's argument): rather human distinctiveness lies in the growth that individually and collectively human beings undergo through time and especially the transformation to which humans are called through their death. This is a vision which is echoed by Dostoyevsky in striking terms, in words addressed by Stavrogin to Shatov, in an appendix to the sixth printing of *The Demons*:

I don't understand why you consider the possession of a mind, that is, consciousness, the greatest of all possible existences? ... Why do you reject the possibility of a secret? Note also that, perhaps, unbelief is natural for man, and this precisely because he puts mind above all; since mind is a property only of the human organism, he thereby neither understands nor wishes to understand life in another form, that is, life beyond the grave—he does not believe that that life is higher. On the other hand, by nature the sense of despair and wretchedness is proper to man, for the human mind is so constituted that at every moment it doubts itself, is not satisfied with himself, and man is therefore prone to consider his existence inadequate. We are, clearly, transitory beings and our existence on earth is, clearly, a process, the uninterrupted existence of a chrysalis transitioning into a butterfly. (cited in Bulgakov 2021, 1–2, fn.1)

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