

At last Towards the Good: The Eschatology of St. Gregory of Nyssa

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Abstract

In this paper, I will demonstrate that Gregory of Nyssa provides a compelling and beautiful alternative vision of last things, one that not only remains within the bounds of Christian Orthodoxy, but is sourced from its very roots. Gregory's theology is centered around his vision of a God who is indeed only good and who has an ultimately good plan for all of humanity. Western evangelicals' current hellish iteration of Christianity claims that God is good in ways that necessarily *contradict* human comprehension. In contrast, Gregory elevates the goodness of God *beyond* human comprehension. His belief in the ultimate restoration of all things allows him to congruently claim that "God in his own nature, is everything that can be conceived of as good; or rather, being beyond any good that can be conceived or comprehended."¹ This should pique the interest of those experiencing this Great Deconstruction.

For those who are on a quest to find an antidote to our current hellish theologies—theologies that would make God evil—Gregory offers a healing salve. For those whose heads and hearts have deemed this current iteration of Christianity untenable but who don't wish to leave their Christian faith, Gregory offers a path forward. He beckons these seekers to journey deeper into the roots of orthodox Christianity to find a cohesive vision of a good God, with a good plan, and an ultimately good outcome for all. Gregory does not stand alone in this perspective. His thoughts echo in the writings and sermons of some of the most formative voices of Christian theology, both before him and after. We could also look to saints and theologians like Maximus the Confessor, Isaac the Syrian, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Macrina the Younger, Basil, and Gregory Nazianus, among many others, to receive this antidote to our current malaise. However, in this paper, I will specifically examine the eschatology of one of the most brilliant and celebrated early church Fathers, Saint Gregory of Nyssa. We will see how his view of last things might shape our view of all things.

¹ Behr, Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God, 227

Introduction

Recently, I heard Paul Young, author of *The Shack*, mention that he has unanswered questions about what happens after we die. Sitting beside him, Father John Behr² leaned over with a smirk and simply replied, “*Patience.*” Any eschatological endeavor is by definition speculative, we can only know the future when it becomes our present. However, the impact of such speculation can be great.

The earliest creeds, which define Christian Orthodoxy, are relatively quiet regarding eschatology beyond the Nicene Creed’s single sentence, “I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”³ The ecumenical councils also rarely mention this topic. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappodocian fathers and the subject of this paper, acknowledges that his own writings about last things are just “guesses” and “speculations.”⁴ If eschatology is only speculative, and if it does not rise to the place of dogma or doctrine, it is reasonable to ask *why is a theology of last things important at all?* I offer this: as Christians, our understanding of last things impacts our understanding of all things, and the psychology and behaviors that follow. Our eschatology shapes how we engage the world.

Christianity in the West currently faces what has been called “The Great Deconstruction.”⁵ Unprecedented numbers of people are leaving Christianity and the church,⁶ in part because Christian theology, as it is widely and popularly understood, paints the picture of a god who is not good—a god many are concluding is not worthy of worship.^{7,8}

² Father John Behr is an Eastern Orthodox priest and world-renowned patristics scholar. Having studied under Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, he earned an MPhil and Ph.D. in theology from the University of Oxford. In 2020 Behr was appointed to the Regius Chair in Humanity at the University of Aberdeen, having taught at St Vladimir’s Seminary since 1995. He recently published the first modern critical translation of Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Human Image of God*.

³ “Symbol of Faith,” Orthodox Church in America, accessed September 7, 2024, <https://www.oca.org/orthodoxy/prayers/symbol-of-faith>.

⁴ John Behr, Gregory of Nyssa: *On the Human Image of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 221

⁵ A great book on this topic is Brad Jersak’s book *Out of the Embers: Faith After the Great Deconstruction* (Pasadena: Whitaker House, 2022)

⁶ Jim Davis, Michael Graham, and Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023), 28

⁷ In the previously mentioned book *The Great Dechurching* the authors present research that overwhelmingly supports their thesis that we are currently in the middle of the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of our country (pg xxii). Among the top twelve reasons people stopped attending are “I began to doubt God’s goodness” and “suffering changed my view of God” (pg 49)

⁸ Another great resource on this topic, including data demonstrating the masses of young people leaving the evangelical church, is David Gushee’s *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020)

Our eschatology is deeply connected to how we understand the character and plans of God and how we behave in the world as a result. Our western evangelical understanding of “last things” has shifted the focus of many Christians away from following Jesus’ example of loving our neighbor and enemy. Instead, as a result of specific eschatological ideas that are relatively recent in church history, many Christians are turning towards beliefs and actions that seem to contradict the way of Jesus: celebrating violence, unconditional support of Israel due to the role it plays in the popular evangelical eschatological vision of the end times, and accepting that eternal conscious torment is a necessary function of God’s judgment, or even taking solace in it as a form of divine vengeance.

The role that the concept of eternal conscious torment plays in this Great Deconstruction cannot be overstated. It is, at the very least, problematic that a good God would create humans while knowing they will suffer, and knowing (or even planning) that many would ultimately face eternal torment. Many cannot reconcile their heads and hearts with the idea that an all-powerful and all-knowing god could also be good if suffering and torment are the ultimate outcome of this god’s plan. It is not an exaggeration to say that many Christians have been taught that their heavenly father is abusive. It should not come as a surprise then, that many are parting ways with this image of God. Neither should it surprise us when Christians who continue to embrace the vision of an abusive god, then act in abusive ways. They are only mirroring what they have been taught about God. This is certainly a sad state of affairs, but is there a less harmful alternative view of God, and of God’s plans, that exists within the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy?⁹

In this paper, I will demonstrate that Gregory of Nyssa provides a compelling and beautiful alternative vision of last things, one that not only remains within the bounds of Christian Orthodoxy, but is sourced from its very roots. Gregory’s theology is centered around his vision of a God who is indeed only good and who has an ultimately good plan for all of humanity. Western evangelicals’ current hellish iteration of Christianity claims that God is good in ways that necessarily *contradict* human comprehension. In contrast, Gregory elevates the goodness of God *beyond* human comprehension. His belief in the ultimate restoration of all things allows him to congruently claim that “God in his own nature, is everything that can be conceived of as good; or rather, being beyond any good that can be

⁹ It is understood that not everyone is looking for an alternative within Christian orthodoxy, but for those who are, Gregory offers a different vision than many have received.

conceived or comprehended.”¹⁰ This should pique the interest of those experiencing this Great Deconstruction.

For those who are on a quest to find an antidote to our current hellish theologies—theologies that would make God evil—Gregory offers a healing salve. For those whose heads and hearts have deemed this current iteration of Christianity untenable but who don’t wish to leave their Christian faith, Gregory offers a path forward. He beckons these seekers to journey deeper into the roots of orthodox Christianity to find a cohesive vision of a good God, with a good plan, and an ultimately good outcome for all. Gregory does not stand alone in this perspective. His thoughts echo in the writings and sermons of some of the most formative voices of Christian theology, both before him and after. We could also look to saints and theologians like Maximus the Confessor, Isaac the Syrian, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Macrina the Younger, Basil, and Gregory Nazanius, among many others, to receive this antidote to our current malaise. However, in this paper, I will specifically examine the eschatology of one of the most brilliant and celebrated early church Fathers, Saint Gregory of Nyssa. We will see how his view of last things might shape our view of all things.

Who was Gregory, and why is his perspective important?

Looking back to Gregory’s theology as a corrective to our current theology, it is important to understand his prominent role in shaping Christian orthodoxy. Gregory’s teachings directly challenge much of current western evangelical theology. Unfortunately, when our beliefs are challenged, one common defense is to quickly yell “heresy!” and shut down curiosity or honest evaluation. For this reason, it is helpful to recognize early in this paper that Gregory is no fringe theologian; he is *at the very center of the codification of early orthodoxy*.

Gregory of Nyssa (Γρηγόριος Νύσσης or Γρηγόριος Νυσσηνός; c. 335 – c. 394) was one of the great Cappadocian Fathers and Mothers:¹¹ the three siblings, Basil, Gregory, and Macrina the Younger, as well as their dear friend Gregory of Nazianus. His parents, Basil the Elder and Emmelia of Caesarea are venerated as saints in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. Gregory of Nyssa’s grandfather was martyred for his Christian faith, likely before Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire. Gregory’s grandmother, Macrina the Elder, was a student of Gregory the Miracle Worker, who

¹⁰ Behr, Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God, 227

¹¹ Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazanius are typically referred to as the Cappadocian Fathers. However, Macrina the younger clearly had such an impact, along with her mother and grandmother, that they should be celebrated equally. I refer to them here as the Cappadocian Fathers and Mothers.

is also venerated as a saint in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. It cannot be overstated that there has never existed a family more instrumental in defining Christian orthodoxy. Gregory attributes most of his eschatological ideas to his brother, St. Basil the Great,¹² and his older sister, St. Macrina the Younger.^{13,14}

Gregory of Nyssa played a prominent role¹⁵ in the 2nd Ecumenical Council, where the Nicene Creed was finalized. It is still the most ecumenical of the creeds and the defining statement of orthodoxy among mainstream Christianity.^{16,17} Gregory has been celebrated in the notes of many of the early ecumenical councils with the titles such as “Father of the Fathers”, “Champion of the Faith”, “Indomitable champion of the church” and “Venerable Doctor.”¹⁸ Far more compelling than the titles given to him by Christian leaders through the ages is the fact that Gregory’s connected anthropology and eschatology led him to become the earliest recorded voice in antiquity calling for the abolition of slavery.¹⁹

A Summary of Gregory’s Theology of Last Things

Gregory’s eschatological writings are numerous, so the scope of this paper is necessarily limited to a brief survey of his eschatological thought. Gregory’s relevant views covered here are (1) that there are two creations of humanity recorded in Genesis: one in the intellect and foreknowledge of God, and another which is compositional in time and space, (2) that humanity was created as a single human

¹² In Gregory’s cover letter to “On the Human Image of God” (Behr, *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*, 145), he claims the theology he presents is a recounting the teachings of his late brother, St. Basil.

¹³ *On the Soul and Resurrection* is written as a dialogue between Gregory and his sister, Macrina, who he calls “The Teacher”.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993)

¹⁵ Gregory preached his sermon “In suam ordinationem” during the council, he was also chosen to eulogize the bishop Meletius, who passed during the council. The Orthodox church of America describes Gregory as “one of the chief figures at the council,” and His Trinitarian writings and thought impacted the updates that were made then to the creed. (Maspero & Mateo Seco, p. 750, Saint Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa), “Orthodox Church in America, accessed September 8, 2024, <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2001/01/10/100140-saint-gregory-bishop-of-nyssa>)

¹⁶ “In the most common sense, ‘mainstream’ refers to Nicene Christianity, or rather the traditions which continue to claim adherence to the Nicene Creed.” *World Encyclopaedia of Interfaith Studies: World religions* (Jnanada Prakashan, 2009), 978-81-7139-280-3

¹⁷ Christopher R. Seitz, *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001)

¹⁸ The Seventh General Council, the Second of Nicaea, Held A.D. 787, in which the Worship of Images was Established: With Copious Notes from the “Caroline Books”, Compiled by Order of Charlemagne for Its Confutation, Council of Nicea, Translated by Mendham, John, Published by John. W.E. Painter, 1850, page 382

¹⁹ J. Kameron Carter, “Interlude on Christology and Race: Gregory of Nyssa as Abolitionist Intellectual,” in *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 229–252, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195152791.003.0010>

nature together as one “plentitude,” and that only this plentitude constitutes the full image of God in humanity, (3) that God is infinite good, and that evil is finite, which logically necessitates that finite evil ultimately be exhausted while infinite good remains, (4) that there is a coming resurrection and reconstitution of all things (apocatastasis, ἀποκατάστασις), (5) that there will be an eternally dynamic interaction of mutable humanity with the immutable God, (6) and that the soul and the body are created concurrently, over and against the teaching of the pre-existence of souls or bodies. Finally, in order to defend Gregory’s orthodoxy from attacks by ill-informed or ill-intentioned heretic hunters, I will present a brief analysis of the 5th Ecumenical Council.

That there are two creations of humanity recorded in Genesis: one in the intellect and foreknowledge of God, and another which is compositional in time and space

Gregory sees in Genesis two distinct but connected creative acts, two sides of the same coin. In the first act, humankind is created in the intellect and foreknowledge of God, similar to how a great artist or craftsman might first create their masterpiece in their mind before then composing it in time and space. In other words, God preconceived (προκατανοηθέντος) all humans through foreknowledge.²⁰ This is not merely an act of God’s imagination, but is an act of Divine creation which Gregory sees as actual, and as reaching its telos (τέλος) before the compositional molding of our current reality then begins. He writes that at the end of creation, Adam had not yet been created in time and space, “The image of God, then, that which is contemplated in the universal human nature, had its end (τέλος); but as yet, Adam was not.”²¹ To be clear, Gregory does not see this first act as the creation of the first of many humans but rather as the creation of *all* humankind, which together represent the image of God. In the same treatise, he says, “In accordance with the image, then, the human being came to be, that is the universal nature, the godlike thing; by the omnipotent wisdom not a part of the whole, but the plentitude of nature as a whole came to be.”²²

It is only after this perfect creation of the plentitude of humankind is complete in the will and intellect of God that the second act—the temporal, or compositional, creation—then takes place. The first act of creation exists outside of time, in the will of God. The second exists temporally, in time and

²⁰ Behr, Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God, 257

²¹ Ibid., 225

²² Ibid., 255

space, as the sequential composition of that which already exists in its telos state within God's intellect and foreknowledge.

David Bentley Hart argues that Gregory saw in the language of the New Testament not an everlasting division between two cities (as Augustine would later contend) but a division between two moments, between the eternally willed and the temporal creation. There exist "Two distinct eschatological horizons, one wholly enclosed within the other. For [Gregory], the making and redemption of the world belong to that one great process by which God brings to pass the perfect creation that has resided from everlasting in the divine will, conceived and intended by him before all ages. All of created time is, he believed, nothing but the gradual unfolding, in time and by way of change, of God's eternal and immutable design."²³

This idea of a willed creation, followed by a temporal, compositional creation, appears throughout Gregory's writings. While *On the Human Image of God* and *On the Soul and Resurrection* are his two works that directly address eschatology, Gregory's other writings and homilies also assume this two-fold creation. For example, in his *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, he speaks of being restored to the image. "But since the filth of sin has disfigured the beauty of the image, He came to wash us with His own water, the living water that springs up unto eternal life. And so, when we have put off the shame of sin we shall be restored once more to the blessed form."²⁴ In the conclusion to his first *Homily on Ecclesiastes*, he demonstrates this same thinking, "What will you become as you beautify yourself in such ways? What loveliness will you put on? If you carefully consider this with your mind, you will have been taught what came to be in the first, which indeed will truly come to be, that which is 'in the image and likeness of God.'"²⁵ Reading Gregory closely, one begins to see that he has inverted the *arche* and the *telos*. In his understanding, creation starts with the end (existing actually in the will of God, outside of time), and only then does it have a temporal beginning from which to start being composed in time and space. Gregory looks to the beginning to see the end.

That the creation of humanity is as a single human nature together as one plentitude, and it is only this plentitude that constitutes the full image of God in humanity

²³ David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 139

²⁴ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's Prayer, The Beatitudes*, trans. and annotated by Hilda C. Graef (New York: Paulist Press, 1954), 88

²⁵ Behr, Gregory of Nyssa: *On the Human Image of God*, 92

Another distinctive characteristic of Gregory's eschatology (which, for him, is inextricably connected to his anthropology and soteriology) is his insistence that the tapestry of humanity is a single thread. God creates the plentitude of humans together as one humanity made in God's image. The reconstitution of all things is then fulfilled only when the plentitude together fully represents that image. Gregory writes,

When the account [in Genesis] says 'God made the human being' (ἐποίησεν Θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον), all humankind is indicated by the indefinite character of the term . . . the name given to the created human is not the particular, but of the universal. Thus, 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.^{26,27}

As Father John Behr puts it, Gregory's "very strong understanding of the unity of all human beings—past, present, and future—as one human being is, again, an expression of God's instantaneous and comprehensive act of making which unfolds through its own sequence and order."²⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar eloquently summarizes Gregory's thought: "the total Christ is none other than the total humanity"^{29,30}

For Gregory, the image of God exists fully in the indivisible totality of humankind. From eternity—before any "Act two" individual humans are created in time and space—God conceives the human being (*anthropos*) within the reality of his will. The human being is created perfectly in God's likeness, containing God's virtues, and is humanity's archetype. It is important to note that this is not merely a single template. It is not the "ideal" or "form" of ancient Greek thought, but is the actual plentitude of humanity, every named and numbered human being, from every age, together comprising the image of God.

David Bentley Hart explains this in his book *That All Shall be Saved*,

²⁶ Gregory understood this universal humanity to be a concrete number of all individual humans of all ages, who together make up this plentitude. The fulfillment of their creation in "Act two" will be cause for the resurrection.

²⁷ Behr, *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*, 107

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 108

²⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans Mark Sebanc (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995 [1944], 87.

³⁰ I am grateful to Fr John Behr for this reference to von Balthasar's work

Gregory reads Genesis 1:26-7—the first account of the creation of the race, where humanity is described as being made ‘in God’s image’—as referring not to the making of Adam as such, but to the conception within the eternal divine counsels of this full community of all of humanity: the whole of the race, comprehended by God’s ‘foresight’ as ‘in a single body,’ which only in its totality truly reflects the divine likeness and the divine beauty.³¹

In Gregory’s view, Adam and Eve are the first individuals created in God’s temporal “Act two” composition of the fullness of humanity which already exists in God’s “Act one” foreknowledge and will. In time and space, they are “merely the first members of that concrete community that only as a whole can truly reflect the glory of its creator.”³² Note Gregory’s use of the word “concrete.” He believed that each individual is preconceived by God and that the plenitude of humanity in time and space will reach exactly that same number, made up of exactly the same persons.

That God is infinite good, that evil is finite, and the resulting necessity that finite evil will eventually be exhausted while infinite good remains

Like Irenaeus before him and Maximus after, Gregory saw reality as a kind of cosmic classroom. The process of growth and maturing that happens for each individual is also what the entire plenitude of humanity is experiencing. This process of maturing needs the time and space to unfold, but in the end, all will eventually be drawn towards the good for which we are created. This perspective sees human history not as a waste of time that is somehow overwritten at the end of the age, but rather as the necessary time and environment needed for humanity’s ascent into virtue and likeness with God. All of our experiences as individuals—and as the connected human community—have a pedagogical purpose, enabling humanity to grow towards The Good, our ultimate destination.

Gregory builds his case for the ultimate restoration of all humans by bringing together actions and attributes that appear to be opposed. This is a common feature of his theology as he brings together motion with rest, mutability with immutability, and the finite with the infinite.

In nearly all of his writings, as with most early church fathers, Gregory recognizes God as the infinite source of all goodness. No matter what heights of good can be imagined, God’s goodness infinitely surpasses them. In his homilies on the beatitudes, Gregory refers to God as:

³¹ Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, 139

³² *Ibid.*, 139

This true light that is the Fount of All Goodness, mighty above all else; the one thing lovable which is always the same, rejoicing without end in infinite happiness. Even if one has said about It all one can, yet one has said nothing worthy of It. For the mind cannot reach that which IS; even if we continue to think ever more sublime thoughts about It, yet no word can express what is meant.³³

Notice his use of immutability and the infinite together here; this is a common theme for Gregory.

Before we read one of the most compelling excerpts of Gregory's writings, I want to further orient us to his idea of "The Good." In the above excerpt, Gregory refers to God as "The Fount of all Goodness," and here again, we will see him refer to God as the eternal, incomprehensible, "Transcendent Good."

...this goodness that can be contemplated yet cannot be seen? Which gives being to all things, but itself is ever-existing and has no need of becoming? But lest our words should labor in vain in our effort to reach what is inaccessible, we will cut short our enquiry into the nature of the Transcendent Good; for it is impossible that such a thing should come within the scope of our comprehension. We have however, gained one advantage from our examination: we have succeeded in forming an idea of the greatness of what we have sought by the very fact of having been unable to perceive it.³⁴

When writing about humanity's pedagogical journey towards The Good, Gregory notes important differences between God and humanity. God is immutable and is the Infinite Good. In contrast, humanity is mutable by nature; We are ever moving, ever changing. God's goodness is infinite while humanity's evil is finite, thus every human will ultimately fully reach this infinite God who is the Fount of All Goodness. Some will reach the Good due to their orientation and progress towards it. Yet even those who are oriented towards evil, since they are ever changing, will ultimately exhaust evil (as it is finite) and finally, necessarily, turn towards the infinite good. In Gregory's words:

It is impossible that that which is mutable and alterable should be stronger and more abiding than that which is always as it is and established in the good. But the divine counsel

³³ St. Gregory of Nyssa, The Lord's Prayer, The Beatitudes, 88

³⁴ Ibid., 112

certainly and absolutely possess immutability, while the changeability of our nature does not remain steadfast even in evil. That which is always in motion, if its progress is towards the good, will never cease because of the infinity of the course to be traversed, from moving towards what lies ahead; for it will not find any limit of that which it seeks, such that when it has grasped it, it will then bring rest from movement. But if its tendency is in the opposite direction, whenever it has traversed the course of wickedness and reached the extreme limit of evil, then that which is ever-moving, finding no resting point for its natural impulse, since it has run through the interval in wickedness, by necessity turns its movement towards the good. For as evil does not extend to infinity, but is bounded by necessary limits, the accession of the good consequently succeeds the limit of evil, and this, as we have said, the ever-moving character of our nature runs its journey once more at last towards the good, chastened by the memory of its former misfortunes so that it will never again be in the same circumstances. Our course will again be in what is good, because the nature of evil is bounded by necessary limits.^{35,36}

Gregory was confident that the plentitude of humanity would eventually be drawn towards The Good.³⁷ This is not an isolated passage but is a consistent theme throughout Gregory's works. Elsewhere, he says, "The rest [those who did not practice virtue in the present life] will be liberated from the material passion thanks to the purifying fire³⁸ and thanks to the desire for the good they will return

³⁵ Behr, Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God, 253

³⁶ This is the first passage of Gregory's that "leapt off the page" to me when I was first reading the early church fathers and mothers.

³⁷ While outside the scope of this paper, a topic worthy of future study is the stark contrast between Gregory's system of thought oriented around God's infinite and unchanging goodness and the pedagogical nature of the cosmos, and the more legally-oriented system that Augustine would introduce just a few decades after Gregory's death (and that Calvin would build further upon). The reader is encouraged to consider how Augustinian ideas of original sin, inherited guilt, penal substitutionary atonement, just war, and election, may be foreign to Gregory's system of thought. It is unfortunate that Augustine did not have a better understanding of Greek or have more influence from the Eastern Fathers.

³⁸ Expounding on this idea of purifying fire is also outside the scope of this paper. It is worth noting that when read out of context, without an understanding of Gregory or early Christian thought on the topic, one could uncritically import words about "fire" into a Dante-inspired vision of retributive and eternal hell. Gregory understands these fires to be pedagogical, as some combination of pursuing and experiencing evil while being pursued by and experiencing Love. Gregory, and many, many of the early church fathers, speak of purifying fire in this way.

to grace that was meant from the beginning.”³⁹ In *Inscriptiones Psalmorum*, Gregory says that human beings should use their mutability so that they may turn to good.⁴⁰

That there is a coming resurrection and reconstitution of all things

Apocatastasis is at the core of Gregory’s system of thought, as he sees “the ultimate goal of the journey is a return to the beginning.”⁴¹ In *Inscriptiones Psalmorum*, Gregory makes the case that all evil will be removed in the restoration of the universe to the good.⁴² To be clear, this is not the removal of people but the removal of evil. It is the ultimate meeting of the first and second creation. This is one way Gregory’s vision differs from earlier Greek thought around ideals and forms. Ultimately, for Gregory, the two sides of the coin collapse into one as the temporal creation finally ascends into the preconceived eternal creation. At the end of the composition, they become a single eternal reality: humanity in dynamic union with God. Christ restores everything to the state that it exists in the first creation.⁴³ We should be careful not to confuse this to mean that Gregory saw the first creation as a temporal pre-fall state and the second as a temporal post-fall state, with the *apocatastasis* then restoring the temporal “pre-fall” state. Gregory’s understanding, as we have discussed previously, is that there is a non-temporal “First act” of creation that exists outside of time, in the will and intellect of God. Gregory’s vision of *apocatastasis*, which Behr translates as the “Reconstitution of all things” throughout his translation of *On the Human Image of God*,⁴⁴ should be thought of as the completion of the ascension—or the maturing—of the “second act” which exists in time, to finally reach and become reconciled to the “first act” which exists outside of time.

In other words, when the plentitude of the human being has reached its fullness in both number and maturity, the purpose of this present pedagogical time and space will have come to an end. This will then be the occasion of the resurrection and the reconstitution of all things. It is the meaning of Paul’s “twinkling of an eye” and of all humanity meeting Christ in the sky. The second act will finally have reached the eternal reality of the first act. This is the end of the age.

³⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 9, ed. W. Jaeger (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 56.21–57.2.

⁴⁰ Giulio Maspero, Miguel Brugarolas, and Ilaria Vigorelli, eds., *Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Eschatology*, vol. C1 of *Studia Patristica* (Paris: Peeters, 2021), 221

⁴¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione*, 51.168

⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, *Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 37

⁴³ Maspero, Brugarolas, Vigorelli, *Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Eschatology*, 210

⁴⁴ Behr, *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*

Gregory imagines resurrected bodies as glorious, and quite different than what we may expect. While he does build an elaborate case for the possibility of physical elements reuniting at the resurrection,⁴⁵ he admits this is ultimately a mystery. Gregory proposes that we will be recognizable as ourselves, but there will be significant differences such as not needing food and not having gender. He argues that “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 to be seen in the life we now live.”^{46,47}

This is the apocatastasis—the reconstitution of all. Gregory stresses that “nothing that was created by God will be excluded from the saved.”⁴⁸ All mankind, as a plenitude, is the image of God. Therefore this resurrection, or salvation from death, must apply to every person who has been created. All will have turned at last towards The Good.

That there will be an eternally dynamic interaction of mutable humanity with the immutable God

While we’ve previously examined the relationship of the beginning (*arche*, or source) and the end (*telos*, or fulfillment) in Gregory’s thought, we should consider that these are not carbon copies of each other. Though the *arche* and the *telos* will meet together in the reconstitution of all things, Gregory does want to ensure we don’t think of this as a static end state. The *telos* is not the end of the story; it is fulfillment or perfection. In Gregory’s vision, this *telos* is the eternally dynamic movement between the mutable and the immutable. In his exploration of *Gregory of Nyssa’s Eschatological Ontology*, G. Maspero addresses this:

The return to the *arche* is real, but at the same time the *telos* does not simply coincide with it as a mere repetition that overcomes the historical and corporeal dimensions. The final status will be dynamic and not static, corresponding to God’s will from the beginning. This means that the inversion between *arche* and *telos* is structural because only in the definitive eschatological movement will the beginning be revealed. This is not a matter of knowledge alone, but also of ontology. Man was created for the infinite progress of the eternal and ever-growing union with the triune God, so that eschatological perfection is not a mere return to a

⁴⁵ This occupies a large part of what is taught to Gregory by his sister, Macrina the Younger in *On the Soul and The Resurrection*. Gregory includes a treatment of this topic throughout *On the Human Image of God*

⁴⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione*, 113

⁴⁷ Behr, *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*, 131

⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Tunc et ipse*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 3/2, ed. W. Jaeger (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 21.2–3

condition, but, more deeply, a definitive relation that makes possible a constantly increasing participation in the life of the Trinity.⁴⁹

Again, Gregory uses the seemingly opposed mutability of humankind and the immutability of the infinite Good to propose a dynamic eternal union. David Bentley Hart notes that this is a romantic union; humanity is ever changing and thus dynamically discovering more and more of the infinite mystery of God's goodness. This is not an eternally unsatisfied longing but instead is a dynamic relationship, where humanity is always drawn further up and further in, into the infinity of God. As humankind continues to interact with the infinite good, even as it is satisfied, it never exhausts the infinite depths of goodness. Put another way, Gregory's idea of heaven after the end of the age is the eternal ascent of the mutable human soul into God's immutable infinite goodness.

That the soul and the body are created concurrently, over and against the teaching of the pre-existence of souls or bodies.

In his book, *On the Human Image of God*, Gregory distinguishes his apocatastasis-centered system of thought from other ideas of *apocatastasis* that are quite different due to their reliance upon the pre-existence of souls. He writes:

Some of those before us, by whom the topic of principles has been treated, thought it appropriate to say that souls pre-existed as people in a polity of their own and that there are set forth there the paradigms of vice and virtue, and that the soul residing there in goodness remains without experience or conjunction with the body, but if it flows away from its participation in the the good it falls down to this present mode of life and so comes to be in a body.⁵⁰

Evaluating Gregory's arguments against the pre-existence of souls is outside the scope of this paper, but for our purposes it is worth noting that Gregory believed that these arguments derived "one absurdity from another absurdity"⁵¹ and that "their doctrine mythologizes through incoherent points."⁵² In Gregory's system of thought and his vision of *apocatastasis*, neither the soul nor the body exist before the other, but instead, they come into existence concurrently.

⁴⁹ Maspero, Brugarolas, Vigorelli, *Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Eschatology*, 29

⁵⁰ Behr, *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*, 289

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 293

⁵² *Ibid.*

in defense of Gregory and his theology: a brief analysis of the 5th ecumenical council

Understanding the 5th Ecumenical Council may prove valuable for Christians who find Gregory's theological vision to be a beautiful alternative to this current iteration of western evangelical Christianity and who desire to stay within orthodoxy. This is because the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa, a church father celebrated through the ages, are surprisingly sometimes labeled by modern evangelicals as heretical.⁵³ I understand this to be an error similar to that which C.S. Lewis describes in his introduction to Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, we are blinded by our era and culture's particular iteration of Christianity, including its own blind spots and diversions from orthodoxy. Modern western Christians who would dismissively hand-wave what is arguably the most coherent and beautiful end-to-end system of Christian thought must do so based only on spurious claims and naive word associations. Specifically, many wrongly assume that Gregory's beliefs on apocatastasis were anathematized at the 5th Ecumenical Council. This claim falls into pieces at the least bit of scrutiny.

First, Gregory was repeatedly celebrated by this same council. In the recorded session notes, Gregory of Nyssa is referred to as "Holy Gregory" repeatedly.^{54,55,56,57} The writings of Cyril, which the council sought to bolster, were often read. In these writings, Gregory and his brother Basil, were identified as "holy and orthodox fathers,"⁵⁸ "teachers of total orthodoxy and famed for it,"⁵⁹ and "our holy fathers."⁶⁰ The Acts of the Council lean upon Gregory's defense of the Trinity and call him, along with Basil, Gregory Nazianus, and Athanasius, "The supreme luminaries of the church." We will look more closely at what the council may have been doing, but it is absurd to claim that it has anything to do with opposing Gregory or his theology.

Secondly, the anathemas are the project of Emperor Justinian, who had political reasons to put down an uprising of Palestinian "Origenists."⁶¹ It is relevant that Justinian brought together violence, power, the church, and theology to a degree that no other emperor had previously. His motivations

⁵³ My reference here is anecdotal. I offer only my personal experience in conversations, social media threads, emails, and other communications with evangelical Christians in the West. These experiences are part of the motivation for my writing this paper

⁵⁴ Richard Price, *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople 553* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 310

⁵⁵ Ibid., 316

⁵⁶ Ibid., 319

⁵⁷ Ibid., 339

⁵⁸ Ibid., 328

⁵⁹ Ibid., 329

⁶⁰ Ibid., 330

⁶¹ Ibid., 277-279

were often centered in control, theological uniformity was one tool he used to deal with those he saw as his opposition, while another was extreme violence at massive scale^{62,63}. If one was selecting a representative of Christian orthodoxy and had to choose between Justinian and Gregory as a source of authentic orthodoxy, it would be quite a simple choice.

Third, the notorious fifteen Anathemas against Origen are strikingly missing from the otherwise very detailed notes from each session and from the Acts themselves. The most plausible explanation for this is that they were submitted prior to the council, at an unofficial, smaller session,⁶⁴ and were then attached to the Acts of the Council after the fact.⁶⁵

Fourthly, the fifteen anathemas do not at all condemn Gregory but rather condemn the teaching of the pre-existence of souls, which Gregory of Nyssa had also rejected⁶⁶. The anathemas start with “If anyone asserts the fabulous pre-existence of souls, and shall assert the monstrous [bodiless, identityless] restoration which follows from it: let him be anathema.”⁶⁷ It is worth noting that a decade

⁶² Constance and Head, in *Justinian II of Byzantium* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972) state that “Emperor Justinian declared war against the followers of Origen... In 553, (he) issued his anathemas against Origen, possibly submitting them for final ratification at an extra-conciliary or unofficial session of the Fifth Ecumenical Council, also called the Second Council of Constantinople

⁶³ We need only read the writings of Prokopios on *The Wars of Justinian*, to get a sense of the scale of the violence that Justinian directed. A single example, the Nika riots and following massacre, are enough to paint a clear picture of the violence Justinian was capable of to achieve his purposes of political unity. Prokopios’s *Secret History*, in its final words, labels Justinian as possibly the “Chief of demons.”

⁶⁴ Price, *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 553*, 271

⁶⁵ No one provides a more spirited challenge to the validity of the 15 anti-Origenist Anathemas than David Bentley Hart in his article simply titled “Saint Origen,” *First Things* no. 257 (October 2015): published by the Institute on Religion and Public Life, edited by R. R. Reno (New York). He writes, “I cannot really say what irks me more, though: that it happened or that, in fact, it really never did. The oldest records of the council (which was convened to deal solely with certain Antiochian theologians) make it clear that those fifteen anathemas were never even discussed by the assembled bishops, let alone ratified, published, or promulgated. And since the late nineteenth century various scholars have convincingly established that neither Origen nor “Origenism” was ever the subject of any condemnation pronounced by the “holy fathers” in 553. The best modern critical edition of the Seven Councils—Norman Tanner’s—simply omits the anathemas as spurious interpolations. As for where they came from, the evidence suggests they were prepared beforehand by the vicious and insidiously stupid Emperor Justinian, who liked to play theologian, who saw the Church as a pillar of imperial unity, and who took implacable umbrage at dissident theologies. A decade earlier, he had sent ten similar anathemas of Origen (or what he imagined Origen to have taught) to Patriarch Menas; and on the council’s eve he apparently submitted the fifteen anathemas of 553 to a lesser synod of bishops, in hope of securing some kind of ecclesial approbation for them. Or they may instead have been proposed at a synod as much as nine years before. Whatever the case, it was only well after the Fifth Ecumenical Council’s close that they were attached to its canons, and Origen’s name inserted into its list of condemned heretics. In this way the anathemas “went on the books,” where they remain: peremptory, garbed in immemorial authority, and false as hell.”

⁶⁶ See the earlier section of this paper dedicated to the topic

⁶⁷ Price, *The Acts of the Council of Constantinople of 553*, 284

earlier Emperor Justinian had socialized an iteration of these anathemas which leveraged several of Gregory's own arguments against the pre-existence of souls.⁶⁸ The anathemas are condemning a particular vision of *apocatastasis*, not the idea of *apocatastasis* itself. At their core they condemn a particular vision of apocatastasis that Gregory himself also condemned.

And finally—though any one of the above points would be enough to refute any claim that Gregory of Nyssa was condemned in the 5th Ecumenical Council—it is important to note the council itself is problematic. It is the most controversial of the Ecumenical Councils with its legitimacy disputed by the current pope during the councils, Pope Vigilius.⁶⁹ In fact, Emperor Justinian had the pope under house arrest. A group of bishops, as large as the group that participated in the council, formed a rival assembly under the leadership of Pope Vigilius.⁷⁰ Additionally, many Christian centers, like Jerusalem, sent smaller contingents to the council than they had sent to the previous council at Chalcedon, since the expected role of this council was to simply confirm edicts already made by the emperor.⁷¹ All of these circumstances bring into question the decisions made at the 5th ecumenical council.

To be clear, Gregory of Nyssa and his vision of the restoration of all things have never been rejected by any ecumenical council. On the contrary, Gregory continues to be respected as one of the supreme luminaries of orthodoxy. Those who condemn him or his teachings as outside of orthodoxy would benefit from studying early Christianity, the Councils, and the writings of the Fathers and Mothers of the church.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, any theology of last things is necessarily speculative. Thus, studying these things can at times seem silly, pedantic, and even a waste of time. But if we take into consideration the fruit of our western evangelical eschatological speculations, including eternal conscious torment and the necessity of God's violence, matters of eschatology become urgent. Gregory offers a more beautiful vision, rooted in the goodness of God. This is not radical, alien theology, found far out on the precarious branches of the tree of Christian theology, it is grounded in our very roots. Gregory's theology displays a beautiful vision that honors all humankind, sees God as the ultimate and

⁶⁸ Ibid., 281

⁶⁹ Ibid., 141, 171-173, 214,

⁷⁰ Ibid., 298

⁷¹ Ibid., 299

infinite good, and hopes for every human to be restored to God's image.⁷² Anchored in these roots, my hope is that many will change their minds, move beyond our harmful theologies and instead join Gregory and many early church fathers and mothers in believing that, no matter how hellish things get, evil is finite and will be exhausted, and that every human will turn, at last, towards The Good.

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⁷² It should be noted here that there are topics related to Gregory's Eschatology that remain relatively unexamined in this paper and are worth additional research, reflection, and perhaps even inclusion in a future iteration. These topics include (1) Christ as the "Span" between the divine and humanity, (2) Christ as the representative of the eternal ideal that breaks into the actual, compositional creation in order to rescue it from death / non-existence, (3) the Spirit, or the energies of grace, as the source of the motion that continually leads humans in their ascent towards the perfect image of God that is represented in the first creation outside of time, (4) the topic of free will and "freed will", and that a human created for the good, in the image of the good, once truly free from entanglements would inevitably choose perfect love, thus is in a sense "bound by their freedom", and (5) the idea of "strength in weakness" in the pedagogy of time and space. For example, the physical weaknesses in human's design enabling them to become rational.

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