



Gregory of Nyssa

by Laurence Freeman

Indian philosophy includes the doctrine of 'advaita' or non-duality. We are not one with ultimate reality but we are not just dualistically related to it either. As with all ideas this one has spawned many versions. There are strong and weak forms of 'advaita'. Similarly Christian mystical consciousness - which is not in itself a matter of ideas but gives birth to that rarest of creations, new ideas - has weak and strong forms of apophatic theology. This is the theology that does not run away from but warmly embraces the unknowability of the mystery of God. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) is as strong in the apophatic mode as you can get. Perhaps because of this, and the fact that he was not early translated into Latin, he has had less influence on western theology and spirituality than on his own Eastern Church. But he is a mind the modern west, tired of religious division, richly benefits from meeting.

Raised as a gentleman farmer in what is now Turkey, Gregory forms one of the three great 'Cappadocian Fathers'. His brother Basil and Basil's friend Gregory of Nazianzen were respectively the politician-legislator and the poet-theologian of the group. Gregory of Nyssa became the mystical philosopher formed by his married life and a turbulent and rather inefficient episcopacy. It seems that it was after his brother's death that he came into his own, though feeling himself called to complete Basil's legacy in defending the Council of Constantinople of 381. This was a landmark in the early church's resistance to Arianism, the doctrine that diminishes the divine stature of Christ. One might think this long battle with a still powerful modern heresy (heresy means literally a 'chosen 'viewpoint) was a mere academic squabble. In fact it concerns our very conception of self and sense of human potential. What Jesus is, we are. One might also think that the mystical tradition had nothing much to offer to this refined argument. In fact no one shows better than Gregory, in the works of his latter half of life, that it is the mystical consciousness enlightening the world of ideas from a supra-rational source that shapes what we best think. The logic of the mystic's experience extends into the realm of thought and action and demands consistency.

Gregory marks a distancing of Christian mysticism from its Greek tradition. Origen, a very Greek mind, shows a weak form of the apophatic. He likes to think that once we have made it through the ascetical obstacle course and mastered our passions we will see what we have longed to see and know what we have longed to know. The Greek idea of perfection is to rise above the changing world and the mutable mind to a realm of divine immobility. From there we sit on a throne of consciousness and look down on the changing world. It is a view that still influences our idea of heaven and blessedness. For Gregory in his treatise *On Perfection*, or his *Life of Moses*, asceticism is the means to overcome the 'civil war in ourselves'. We have to struggle with the angry recollection of injuries suffered, as the citizens of Northern Ireland or Iraq will long have to do. Desire has to be trained and transformed to permit us to live mindfully. We can get better. But perfection is never a final achievement. 'The divine is by its very nature infinite, enclosed by no boundary.' As desire is purified in the work of prayer it does not reach final satisfaction, but intensifies as we make progress. We can never be satisfied with what we get of God.

For Jean Danielou one of the greatest commentators on Gregory, this line of understanding represents an advance on Origen's position. The unknowability, unattainability of God thus creates the mysticism of darkness or 'agnosia' – apparently the opposite of gnosis. There are two kinds of darkness, weak and strong. The first is expressed in what Gregory said of the brother in whose shadow he seemed to feel he stood: 'we saw him enter the darkness where God was...he understood what was invisible to others.' This is acceptable darkness. We are mystified but then we understand, blind then see. But there is a darker darkness: 'the

true vision and the true knowledge of what we seek consist precisely in not seeing, in awareness that our goal transcends all knowledge...'

Perfection is continual progress. The Greek opinion that change is a defect is superseded by the process of always changing into something better, 'from glory to glory'. Every end is a new beginning. The horizon is constantly receding as we approach it. 'Perfection' consists in our never stopping in our growth in good. If we accept this we are faced with serious consequences, provided we wish to live consistently with what we believe. Transcendence and paradox ('motion and stability are the same') are built into human meaning. Consciousness is an expanding universe. The fear that we are condemned to permanent dissatisfaction – a conclusion natural to anyone who is conscious of their cycles of natural desire – is changed to intoxication with the inexhaustibility of bliss. Goodness no longer looks boring and Christ is not an object of idolatry but the Way to the Father.

Knowing God, in the transcendent experience of knowing that we cannot know God, sends us back to ourselves in a new way. Throughout the mystical tradition a fundamental theme is the link between our self-knowledge and our capacity to know God. Gregory positions his Christian anthropology in the biblical assertion that we are 'ikons' of God. There is no Gnostic division between the natural and the supernatural. He is not attracted to the metaphysical play between image and likeness as other mystical teachers are. It is a relief to be logically and theologically persuaded that we are essentially good. Mortality is a remedy for original sin not a punishment and the 'grace of the resurrection is the restoration of the human being to his original state' of blessedness.

Gregory administers a strong dose of 'agnosia'. At first it tastes unpleasant but when we have got over that, we feel its medicinal effect. Paradoxically the human and the created realm is affirmed because we do not stop being human even in union with God. Hope is built into the idea that every end is a beginning. Sin is a refusal to move on. St Paul's term 'epektasis' (Phil 3:13) provides Gregory with a scriptural authority. Tension and expansion, a forgetting of what is behind, a straining forward to the next stage.

This radically affects prayer and gives further depth to Origen's notion of purity. Gregory helps us understand why we can stop thinking of God, and in fact need to, in order to enter fully into prayer. 'Any representation is an obstacle,' he says. This might be seen as a limitation of prayer but in fact it is an expansion of life. 'The person who thinks that God can be known does not really have life, for he has been falsely diverted from true Being to something devised by his own imagination'.

And yet Gregory was not a hermit monk but a bishop, a pastor and teacher. Rather than diminishing the sacramental life his mystical theology vitalises it. In a sermon against those who put off baptism he says that the power of Christianity is twofold: 'regeneration by faith' and 'participation in mystical symbols and rites'. Baptism is an initiation into a land that bears fruit in happiness and the Eucharist is the medicine of immortality that makes a physical difference to those who celebrate it. What could in a friendlier way express the centrality of the contemplative experience in the Church or the meaning of life as a mystical liturgy?

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