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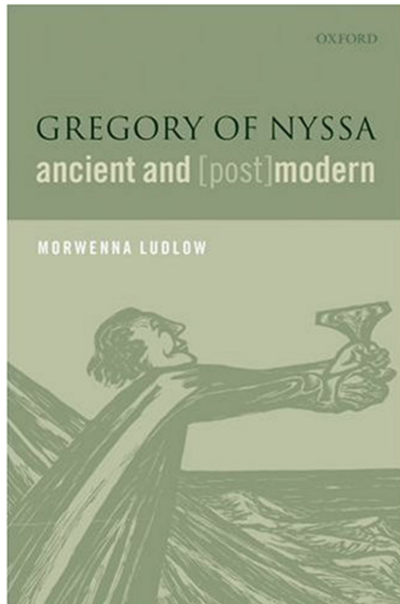

Ludlow, Morwenna

Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern

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This is a valuable contribution to the growing scholarship on Gregory of Nyssa by a scholar who produced a significant study on the most philosophically minded of the Cappadocians (*Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000]). It consists of four parts, each addressing a particular aspect of Gregory's thought: "The Doctrine of the Trinity" (13–94); "God Became Human for our Salvation" (97–159); "Sex, Gender, and Embodiment" (163–227); and "Theology" (231–91). They are followed by a select bibliography, which exclusively lists titles in English, apart from one in German and six in French (293–305), and indexes (307–14). The preference for English scholarship is a deliberate choice, which is explained in the introduction (1–10): after noticing that Gregory, with his richness, has aroused the interest of many scholars—theologians, exegetes, philosophers, feminist historians, and so on—Ludlow announces that she will discuss contemporary theologians' readings of Gregory by focusing on Anglophone readings, because of the increasing diversity between the theological cultures of the Anglophone world and continental Europe. In her analysis Ludlow interestingly tries to detect the ideological conditionings of the interpreters; in parts 1 and 2 rather traditional interpretations are examined, in part 3 feminist interpretations, and in part 4 postmodern readings.

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The scholars to whom part 1 is devoted are Torrance, who reads Gregory in the light of Nicene theology and considers him to be too "Hellenized" (according to Harnack's alleged Hellenization of Christianity) and too "subordinationist"; Robert Jenson, who also accuses Gregory of implicit subordinationism (on the other hand, he correctly grasps, in my view, Gregory's conception of αἰών as temporal, not eternal; I think Gregory owed this conception to Origen; see I. Ramelli and D. Konstan, *Terms for Eternity* [Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias, 2007]); John Zizioulas, according to whom Gregory and all the Cappadocians took a distance from Platonism; and David Brown, who takes Gregory as a supporter of the "plurality model" of the Trinity, as opposed to Augustine, a supporter of the "unity model." Against the charges of deviating from Nicene language, Ludlow correctly observes that the terminology adopted by the pro-Nicene authors themselves is not consistently homogeneous but various and complex. L. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), who reflects on "Western" and "Eastern" Nicene theologians and challenges several assumptions on Nicene and Arian theology, is discussed in an entire *HTR* installment (100 [2007]: 125–241), which of course Ludlow could not cite (see especially S. Coakley's introduction: 125–38). All the authors analyzed in part 1, except for Brown, seem to share the prejudice—and I agree with Ludlow that this is a prejudice—that philosophy, in particular Platonism, was alien to Christianity and dangerous. Together with Ayres and above all with Coakley, Ludlow attacks Zizioulas's claim that the Cappadocians maintained the priority of persons over substance in the Trinity and agrees with Lucian Turcescu that Gregory is not consistent in preferring ὑπόστασις to πρόσωπον.

The centrality of Christ, in particular of his incarnation, for salvation, which Gregory thought to be universal, is well caught by the author. Indeed, I think that the very same doctrine of *apokatastasis* in its main supporters (Gregory of Nyssa, Origen) is essentially grounded, not in a metaphysical necessity, as it was often accused to be, but in Christ's incarnation, sacrifice, and resurrection (see my "Αἰώνιος and Αἰών in Origen and in Gregory of Nyssa," forthcoming in *StPatr*; idem, *Apocatastasi* [Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2008]). Surely their Christology is deeply linked to eschatology. Christ has assumed the whole of humanity, and the implications of this fact on soteriology are very clear in his *In illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius* (see my *Gregorio di Nissa* [Milan: Bompiani, 2007], 655–86). Gregory's Christology is not weak or paradoxical but is, in Brian Daley's words, "remarkably powerful and remarkably consistent," precisely in that it is soteriologically oriented ("Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation," *StPatr* 32 [1997]: 87–95, here 88). Frances Young has correctly stressed that Origen's and Gregory's theory of atonement is focused, not on propitiation and ransom—Ludlow is right to emphasize that the fishhook image in Gregory is only a metaphor—but on "God's victory over evil" (*Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* [London: SPCK, 1975], 92) and over death, the

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consequence of evil. It seems clear that to me precisely the fishhook passage chosen by Ludlow to illustrate Gregory's soteriology (*Or. Cat.* 24) is deeply inspired by Origen. Gregory states that, when the divine hook was gulped by the devil, "life, being introduced into the house of death, and light shining in darkness, that which is diametrically opposed to light and life vanished, for it is not in the nature of darkness to remain when light is present, or of death to exist when life is active." Now, the same argument that life (i.e., Christ, eternal life), being diametrically opposed to death, will make it vanish was brought about by Origen in *Comm. Rom.* 5.7.78–88: "si eadem aeternitas mortis ponatur esse quae uitae est, iam non erit mors uitae *contraria*, sed aequalis. Aeternum namque aeterno *contrarium* non erit, sed idem. Nunc autem certum est mortem uitae esse *contrariam*; certum est ergo quia, *si uita aeterna est, mors esse non possit aeterna*.… Cum enim mors animae, qui est nouissimus inimicus, fuerit destructus … regnum mortis pariter cum morte destructum erit."

Christ's divinity is necessary to soteriology: again, it is in Gregory's *Tunc et Ipse* that I find it most patent how Gregory's rejection of "Arianism" is deeply related to his doctrine of *apokatastasis*, a connection that has its roots in Origen, who, in fact, was not at all a precursor of "Arianism." Sarah Coakley (*Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa* [Oxford: Blackwell, 2003], 7) opportunely invites scholars to find Gregory's great theological themes also in his exegetical works; she is speaking in particular of Gregory's exegesis of the Song of Songs, but this is certainly the case, I think, also with his *Tunc et Ipse*. Ludlow refuses to describe Gregory as a "semi-Pelagian." I believe she is correct, for his theodicy is entirely Origenian, and it was only after the rejection of Origen's theodicy that the alternative was opened between "Pelagian" and "Augustinian" theodicy. The objection leveled against universal salvation by its critics and reported by Ludlow (123), that it seems to make human choices ultimately insignificant, in the case of Gregory's and Origen's universalism is, in my view, easily disproved, because they both assumed that (1) all human choices surely have their consequences *before* the *apokatastasis*, and (2) all rational creatures will adhere to the Good voluntarily, precisely as a fruit of their own choice.

The *apokatastasis* is also closely related to the doctrine of *epektasis*, which, too, as Rowan Williams has well shown (*The Wound of Knowledge* [London: DLT, 1979], 53, 57), is firmly rooted in Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. It is no accident that in Gregory's thought both these associated doctrines are grounded in Christology: it is only Christ's mediation that makes it possible for humans to experience a progressive θέωσις in the *epektasis*.

Like Philo and Origen, Gregory maintained that the human being who was created in the image of God is neither male nor female; this differentiation came only after, not so much

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chronologically as ontologically, for the division into genders is not in the image of God (*Hom. Op.* 16.5–7); thus, it is not essentially intrinsic to humanity and will disappear in the end. Gregory focuses entirely on the first account of the creation of humanity in Gen 1 rather than on 2:18–25, which he disregards. His brother Basil also interprets the latter creation account in the light of the former, stressing that both women and men are made according to the image of God and that Eve's formation from Adam's rib denotes their consubstantiality. Basil stresses the equality of both genders, deriving from the same φύραμα, ὁμοτίμως, and ἐξ ἴσου; men even risk being inferior in εὐσέβεια (*Hom. Iul.* PG 31:240B–41B). Likewise, in *Hom. Ps.* 1 (PG 29:216–17) he insists on the μία ἀρετή and φύσις μία of man and woman, their ὁμότιμος creation, the same ἐνέργεια and the same reward for both (see V. E. F. Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *JTS* 41 [1990]: 441–71). The division of humanity into genders is the solution provided by God to the problem of death caused by the original sin. Humanity's being in the image of God lies primarily in the soul, in its intellectual faculty and freewill. This conception is in fact similar to that of Origen and, I think, also of Bardaisan (who proves to have much in common with Origen), according to whom human intellect is endowed with freewill in that it is in the image of God. Ludlow is right to emphasize that Gregory denies the preexistence of disembodied souls, but I am not sure that this really constitutes a point where Gregory is different from Origen, who maintained that only the Trinity is completely bodiless and strongly rejected any doctrine of metensomatosis, according to which disembodied souls enter a series of bodies (*Cels.* 4.7; *Comm. Rom.* 5.1.392–406; 5.9.171–176; 6.8.118–131). It is true that, as Ludlow maintains, for Gregory the original human nature, image of God and not divided into genders, was already corporeal, but this was the case already for Origen, who identified with the skin tunics only heavy and postlapsarian corporeality, not corporeality *tout court*, in that, again, he thought that only the Trinity is completely disembodied. The atoms of the body, according to Gregory, bear its unique εἶδος and thus are recognized by the soul at the resurrection, when the body is rebuilt in its individuality, and it is significant that precisely the εἶδος—which is ἀμετάβλητον through all the τροπαί the body undergoes and is quite different from the transient μορφή—is closely associated with the part of our soul that is in the likeness of God (*Hom. op.* 27). I note that this conception also coincides with that of Origen, according to whom what will be maintained in the resurrection will be the permanent εἶδος of the body, which determines its individuality (*Comm. Ps.*, in a passage that can be reconstructed thanks to Methodius, *Res.* 1.12–16, 20–24; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 64.10–12). For Gregory's idea that historically no human being has ever had the perfection of humanity in the plan of God but that human perfection in reserved to the τέλος (180–81), I also find a good correspondence in Origen, who puts the "image" at the beginning but the perfect "likeness," achieved through voluntary adhesion to the Good, in the end. Another interesting set of remarks comes from Coakley's observations on Gregory's reversal of

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gender roles in his *De anima*, where the leading character is Macrina, who takes Socrates' place, and in his commentary on Song of Songs, where Christ is also Sophia.

Particular attention is paid to Gregory's *De virginitate* and to his spiritual conception of virginity. This, I observe, was already stressed by Origen, as in *Comm. Rom.* 9.1.87–91 ("nec rursum corpora uirginum uel continentium si aut superbiae macula aut auaritiae sordibus aut linguae maledicae uel mendacii immunditia polluantur hostiam sanctam et Deo placentem putandi sunt ex sola uirginitate corporis obtulisse") and 10.14.110–114, where he stresses that virginity is not due ("non ex debito soluitur, neque enim per praeceptum expetitur") but is a gift that "supra debitum offertur," denoting spiritual perfection ("audi denique Paulum dicentem: 'de uirginibus autem praeceptum Domini non habeo': sic ergo de spiritalibus et perfectioribus communionem dixit"). It is no accident that it appears again in an author who was strongly influenced by Origen (as I argue in "L'Inno a Cristo-Logos nel *Simposio* di Metodio," in *La poesia cristiana* [Rome: Augustinianum, 2008]) and Methodius, *Symp.* 1.1 and 11.1. Gregory, who was or had been married when he wrote *De virginitate* (one of the best discussions of all the extant evidence concerning his marriage is to be found in A. M. Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters* [Leiden: Brill, 2007]), sees in virginity the anticipation of the ἔσχατον and the fulfillment of God's original plan for the human being. Ludlow discusses recent readings of this dialogue that challenge its traditional interpretation: David Hart thinks that Gregory's comments about his married condition are ironic, whereas Virginia Burrus thinks that Gregory here is more complicated and less cynical; she calls attention to Gregory's list of models (e.g., Elijah, John the Baptist, Isaac, and the Virgin Mary), which, I hypothesize, is probably inspired by Methodius's series of examples of virginity in the long hymn at the end of Methodius's *Symposium*, strophes Λ–Σ: this, in the light of Methodius's above-mentioned spiritual conception of ἁγνεία, which was in turn influenced by Origen, would explain very well the apparent oddness noticed by Burrus and Ludlow in Gregory's list, that it includes persons such as Isaac, who was not a virgin in the literal sense.

An important chapter is devoted to Macrina and to how Gregory presents her. Ludlow rightly observes that, although Macrina was the senior leader of a double monastery, usually her institutional role is unduly disregarded. For Gregory, Macrina is a paradigm of *human* virtue (ἀνθρωπίνης ἀρετῆς, *Vit. Macr.* 1), not *female* virtue; this, I note, perfectly fits Gregory's conviction, which stems from Plato and the Stoics, that virtue is one and the same for both men and women. Thus, in *De anima* typical manly virtues such as courage and steadfastness are ascribed to Macrina rather than to her brother; certainly here the *Phaedo* model is at work, and Macrina assumes Socrates' role, but also that of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. While I do not think that, again, it is correct to speak of "Origen's equation of 'coats of skin' with the body" *tout court* (216), since Origen

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seems to have identified the “skin tunics” only with the mortality and heavy corporeality, corruptible and liable to passions, that was the result of the original sin (see my *Gregorio*, 217–19 and relevant notes), I find Ludlow’s remark on 219 very interesting that, since Macrina identifies herself with the body of Christ and offers herself to Christ with words echoing the eucharistic anaphora, Gregory is likely depicting her as a priest. Now, this seems to be confirmed by the sources we have concerning another sister of Gregory’s, Theosebeia, a virgin ascetic belonging to Macrina’s house. In Nazianzen’s Epigrams 161 and 164 she is described as one of Emmelia’s daughters, σύζυγος of a priest, the great Gregory, and a “support of pious women.” Nazianzen’s Letter 197 consoles Gregory on the death of his σύζυγος Theosebeia, and praises her as “the glory of the Church, the adornment of Christ, the advantage of our generation, the confidence and daring [παρρησίαν] of women, the fairest and most outstanding [εὐπρεπεστάτην καὶ διαφανεστάτην] amid such a splendor of siblings, Theosebeia, the *truly sacred* [τὴν ὄντως ἱεράν], *truly fellow of a priest* [ἱερέως σύζυγον], *of equal honor and worthy of the great Mysteries* [ὁμότιμον καὶ τῶν μεγάλων μυστηρίων ἀξίαν].” Like Macrina by Nissen, so too Theosebeia seems to be depicted by Nazianzen in priestly terms.

Among postmodern readings of Gregory’s theology, Ludlow takes into consideration those of Scot Douglass, who analyzes Gregory’s philosophy of language in connection with his apophatic theology; John Milbank, who pays special attention to Gregory’s conception of the eschatological body of Christ (crucial to his theory of *apokatastasis*) as a collective body; and Sarah Coakley, who challenges the assumption that Gregory was a “social Trinitarian” and observes that the “three men” analogy in *Ad Ablabium* is not so much an analogy as a disanalogy in respect to the Trinity; she stresses that Gregory uses many other images to describe the Trinity, such as the rainbow metaphor. In general, Coakley points out the lack of emphasis on hierarchy in the Trinity in Gregory’s theological discourse. Again, I find this particularly clear in his *Tunc et Ipse*. Coakley is also attentive to the ways in which Gregory uses gendered language to challenge human assumptions about the nature of God. Gregory is clear, for example, in the seventh homily on the Song of Songs, that genders do not belong to God, but neither do they belong to the essential human nature that will be restored (or better, fully brought to perfection) in the end. As Ludlow notices (271), one of the most fruitful features of postmodern interpretations of Gregory is that they have brought together epistemology and ontology; in particular, postmodern readings have favored accuracy in considering the epistemological aspect of the *epektasis*. Ludlow concludes that these readings have emphasized that, in Gregory’s view, “not only can there be no experience of God which is beyond knowledge, but there can be no knowledge of God beyond language” (273). Now, it seems to me that this awareness is much the same as that of Plato in his *Tim.* 28C: “The creator and father of this universe is difficult to find and, once it has been found [i.e.,

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known], it is impossible to speak of him to all." Another claim of the author is that "Gregory's texts are written in such a way that they are *intended* to generate multiple meanings" (287), which seems to me to perfectly correspond to Gregory's manifold exegesis of Scripture, deeply indebted to Origen's. However, in its richness, all of Gregory's thought and all of his exegesis is ultimately oriented to the τέλος, and this, I note, is again a characteristic that Gregory shares with his favorite inspirer, Origen (the study that has best demonstrated that Origen's whole thinking is eschatologically oriented is P. Tzamalikos, *Origen: Philosophy of History and Eschatology* [Leiden: Brill, 2007]).

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