

## ‘The Gnostic creates and forms himself’ (Strom. 7.2.13.3):

### Clement and Gregory of Nyssa on Being Human

John Behr

When I first worked on Clement of Alexandria, some thirty years ago, comparing and contrasting his understanding of the human being and the ascetic life with that of Irenaeus of Lyons, I was most struck by their differences. I portrayed Clement’s Gnostic as attempting to live a divine life through his own human effort, ‘creating and forming himself’, and Irenaeus as describing the divine life, as manifest in Christ, lived by human beings. It was, in particular, Clement’s words that the Gnostic ‘creates and forms himself’ that troubled me (or perhaps it was the endless stipulations he gives in the *Pedagogue*), making his project seem all-too-human, a human endeavour after human aspirations, rather than Irenaeus’ emphasis on the human being as the ‘handiwork’ of God, the *plasma* in the hands of God, moulded by God throughout all time.

Today, however, after having spent several decades exploring the theme of being human in early Christianity—going backwards to the Gospel of John and, most recently, forward to a new edition, recently completed, of Gregory of Nyssa’s work *On the Human Image of God* (which, I argue, is the proper title of the work otherwise known as *On the Making of Man*), and much else in between—I am struck instead by their similarities. It hasn’t just been a matter of gathering a few more details, but rather a change in perspective, from protology to eschatology, starting at the end, the end which is in fact the beginning.

#### Becoming Human: Genesis and John

This reorientation was initially prompted by the passing comment of Ignatius to the Christians in Rome, urging them not to interfere with his coming martyrdom: only by following the Passion of his God, he says, will he be born into life and, receiving the light, he ‘will be a human being’ (*Rom.* 6). If to be human requires giving this response, this ‘Amen’ or ‘Let it be’, then, the background for this, I’ve argued elsewhere, is in Christ’s own Passion, as described in the Gospel of John: with Pilate announcing ‘behold the human being’ and Christ saying from the cross ‘it is finished/perfected’, referring back to Genesis, as first verse already indicates, so that the only work which is said in Gen. 1 to be God’s own work, his own project—to make a human being in his image—is completed or perfected when Christ voluntarily ascends the cross, or, as Revelation describes it, ascending to the throne as the slain lamb, the one who speaks of himself as ‘the Amen, the faithful and true martyr, the archē of God’s creation’ (Rev. 3:14: ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως τοῦ θεοῦ).

Likewise for Irenaeus: the living human being that is the glory of God is the martyr (*Haer.* 4.20.7; 5.9.2), so that it is only at the end that Adam comes to be in the image and likeness of God (esp. *Haer.* 5.1.3): having come into existence as an infant, Adam (and we all) requires a long process of pedagogy, continuing throughout the whole economy and culminating in death as the lowpoint, or rather the highpoint, of the experience of weakness where the strength of God can be perfected (*Haer.* 3.20; 4.37-9 etc; 2 Cor 12:9).

#### Becoming Manly: Clement of Alexandria

In Book 4 of the *Stromata*, as is well known, Clement relocates martyrdom from the arena to the daily life of the Christian. He begins the book by say that the order of his work has led him to the point where he will now ‘treat of martyrdom and of who the perfect one is’ (*Strom.* 4.1.1), and that he will follow this with a discussion about faith, inquiry, symbols, the gnostic science of nature, and then ascend from cosmogeny to theology (*Strom.* 4.1.3.2). Martyrdom, he says, is called ‘perfection [τελείωσιν], not because the human comes to the end [τέλος] of his life as others, but because he has exhibited the perfect [τέλειον] work of love’ (*Strom.* 4.4.14.3]. Martyrdom is a ‘confession to God’, witnessing by life and word (*Strom.* 4.4.15.3); in the case of the martyrs, it culminates in the shedding of blood, while ‘gnostic martyrdom’ is shown by one who ‘has conducted himself according to the

rule of the Gospel in love to the Lord' (ibid). His reflections are also focused upon Christ who, as he puts it, 'being life in what he suffered, wished to suffer that we might live by his suffering' (*Strom.* 4.7.43.2).

In a particularly interesting passage in *Stromata* 4, Clement points out that genesis, coming-into-being, is 'twofold': that which comes about from God and that which comes about through our own agency. He begins by picking up on Democritus' pairing of 'nature and instruction', and then claims that the Lord supplies both: both 'that [given] through the creation [τὸ μὲν κατὰ τὴν δημιουργίαν] and that by re-creation and renewal through the covenant [τὸ δὲ κατὰ τὴν ἐκ τῆς διαθήκης ἀνάκτισιν τε καὶ ἀνανέωσιν]' (*Strom.* 4.23.149.5). With both supplied, he says, 'it is possible for the Gnostic to already have become god [ἤδη γενέσθαι θεόν]: I said, you are gods and sons of the Most High' (*Strom.* 4.23.149.8). He then continues:

The human being [Ὁ μὲν οὖν ἄνθρωπος], generically considered, is formed in accordance with the idea of the connate spirit; [ἀπλῶς οὕτως κατ' ἰδέαν πλάσσεται τοῦ συμμοῦς πνεύματος·] for he is not wrought formless and shapeless in the workshop of nature, where mystically the coming-into-being of the human being is accomplished, with both art and essence being common [οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀνείδεος οὐδ' ἀσχημάτιστος ἐν τῷ τῆς φύσεως ἐργαστηρίῳ δημιουργεῖται, ἔνθα μυστικῶς ἀνθρώπου ἐκτελεῖται γένεσις, κοινῆς οὔσης καὶ τῆς τέχνης καὶ τῆς οὐσίας]. But the particular human being [ὁ δὲ τις ἄνθρωπος] is stamped according to the impression produced in the soul by the objects of his choice [κατὰ τύπωσιν τὴν ἐγγυνομένην τῇ ψυχῇ ὧν ἀν αἰρήσῃται χαρακτηρίζεται].

Thus we say that Adam was perfect as far as respects his formation [τέλειον μὲν ὡς πρὸς τὴν πλάσιν γεγονέναι], for none of the distinctive characteristics of the idea and form of the human were wanting to him;

but in coming-into-being he received perfection [ὁ δὲ ἐν τῷ γίνεσθαι τὴν τελείωσιν ἐλάμβανεν], and he was justified by obedience, this being attaining manhood, which depended on him [καὶ δι' ὑπακοῆς ἐδικαιούτο, τοῦτο ἦν ἀπανδροῦμενον τὸ ἐκ αὐτῷ κείμενον].

And the cause lay in his choosing, and especially in his choosing what was forbidden; God was not the cause [αἰτία δὲ ἐλομένου, καὶ ἔτι μᾶλλον τὸ κωλυθὲν ἐλομένου, ὁ θεὸς ἀνάιτος·]. For coming-into-being is twofold—of things born and of things that happen [διττὴ γὰρ ἡ γένεσις, ἢ μὲν τῶν γεννωμένων, ἢ δὲ τῶν γινομένων]. (*Strom.* 4.23.150.2–4)

Adam receives perfection, regarding his formation, yet needs to grow, to be justified through obedience, to attain full manhood. Genesis is two-fold: that which is born, complete as regards its formation; but receiving this perfection nevertheless requires attaining 'manhood', which depends upon the one born.

Clement, of course, prescribes a rigorous discipline for this growth, from the elementary instruction (in almost every detail of daily life) given by the Paedagogue, to the higher levels of more arcane instruction given in the *Stromata*. Throughout, Clement emphasis this two-fold aspect: that which is given by God, and that which comes about by our own agency, that which 'depends upon us' (τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν).<sup>1</sup> God, he says, adapted Adam for the acquisition of virtue, for God 'intended us to be saved of ourselves' (*Strom.* 6.12.96.2: ἡμᾶς δὲ ἐξ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν βούλεται σώζεσθαι). But rather than being some kind of extreme form of Pelagianism, Clement's statements are balanced by an equal emphasis on the inadequacy of our own ascetic endeavours: fruit only comes about by God 'conspiring' with willing souls (*QDS* 21.1–2). In a more philosophical mode, Clement differentiates between a 'joint cause', which produces an effect with another which does not act by itself, and a 'cooperative' cause, 'which while effecting nothing by itself, yet by its accession to that which acts by itself, cooperates with it for the production of the effect in the most intense degree'<sup>2</sup>: the human being must accede to the power of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Strom.* 2.15.62.4; 4.19.124.1; 4.24.153.2; 7.2.8.6; 7.7.48.7; Behr, *Asceticism*, 166ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Strom.* 8.9.33.8–9: τὸ δὲ συνεργὸν [ἐν τῷ] κατ' ἰδίαν μὴ ποιεῖν, ἐτέρῳ δὲ προσερχόμενον τῷ κατ' ἰδίαν ποιοῦντι συνεργεῖν αὐτῷ πρὸς τὸ σφοδρότερον γίνεσθαι τὸ ἀποτελεσμα.

God, and giving its cooperation (that which is dependent upon us) brings about the most complete result.

However, the fundamentally important dynamic of this pedagogy/asceticism, is that it is aimed towards an end which is already given. Adam is perfectly formed for the acquisition of virtue, yet his perfection lies in that acquisition, something to be accomplished. As such, when speaking of ‘perfection’, Clement uses dramatic language to emphasize that any such perfection attained is always an anticipation of that which, in reality, lies ahead, in the future. There are two particular contexts in which he does so. First, in characterizing the newly baptised. Having exhorted conversion in the *Protreptikos*, the *Paedagogue* opens up by describing the newly baptised: they are illumined, adopted, perfected, immortal, deified, ‘gods, sons of the Most High (*Paed.* 1.6.26.1-3; Ps 81.6 LXX) This is a perfection, moreover, which is immediately attained, granted here and now: ‘Straightaway [εὐθέως] upon our regeneration we attain that perfection after which we aspired’ (*Paed.* 1.6.25.1). Christians are already [ἐνθένδε ἤδη] practising the heavenly life, by which they are deified (*Paed.* 1.12.98.3). They have ‘not yet received the perfect gift’, Clement concedes, but he reiterates: ‘they are in the light and the darkness comprehends him not’ for ‘there is nothing intermediate between the light and darkness’. Yet, he continues:

But the end [τέλος] is reserved till the resurrection of those who believe, and it is not the reception of some other thing, but the obtaining of the promise previously made. For we do not say that both take place at the same time—both the arrival at the end and the anticipation [πρόληψις] of that arrival. For eternity and time are not the same, neither is the attempt [ὄρμη] and the final result [τέλος]; but both have reference to the same thing, and one and the same person is concerned in both. Faith, so to speak, is the attempt generated in time; the final result is the attainment of the promise secured for eternity. (*Paed.* 1.6.28.3-5: ἔστι γοῦν, ὡς εἶπεῖν, ὄρμη μὲν ἢ πίστις ἐν χρόνῳ γεννωμένη, τέλος δὲ τὸ τυχεῖν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας εἰς αἰῶνας βεβαίουμενον).

The neophyte has not received the perfect gift as a present reality, but has it by anticipation or in prior-reception (πρόληψις). In other words, the neophyte is here considered from the point of view of that which they will be, their τέλος, their eschatological existence; this state is not yet fully realized as a present reality; but neither is it solely a futural reality: it is in anticipation (πρόληψις) that the neophyte already exists as what he will be after the resurrection. After his regeneration in baptism, this eschatological existence in the light is their true being: ‘having already anticipated [προειληφότες] by faith that which is future’, Clement specifies that it is only ‘after the resurrection we receive it as present. (*Paed.* 1.6.29.3).

Clement redeploys the language of anticipation when giving a sketch of the true Gnostic in *Stromata* 6 and 7. It is here that Clement speaks about the Gnostic forming and creating himself:

This is the activity of the perfected Gnostic, to have converse with God through the great High Priest, being made like the Lord, as far as may be, by means of the whole service (θεραπεία) towards God, [a service] which tends to the salvation of humans, through care of the goodness towards us, and on the other side, through liturgy, through teaching and through beneficence in deeds. Being assimilated to God, the Gnostic even forms and creates himself (ἑαυτοῦ κτίζει καὶ δημιουργεῖ) and adorns those who hear him, assimilating, as far as possible, by an *ascesis* which tends to *apatheia*, to him who is by nature impassible; and this is uninterrupted converse and communion with the Lord. (*Strom.* 7.2.13.2-3)

There are many such beautiful passages in these books. However, rather than seeing this as a state already attained, in concrete reality, this side of the grave, Clement specifies that he is once again talking in terms of proleptic anticipation. The future is already present to the one who has grown in knowledge and love: ‘being persuaded by gnosis how each future thing shall be, he possesses it’ (*Strom.* 7.7.47.5). True gnosis is the wisdom delivered by Christ, which is ‘the knowledge and

apprehension of things present, future, and past’, and as having been delivered and revealed by the Son, it is sure and reliable.<sup>3</sup> He continues, a little later:

Although not yet true as to time and place, yet by that gnostic love through which the inheritance and perfect restitution follow [ἡ κληρονομία καὶ ἡ παντελῆς ἔπειτα ἀποκαταστάσις], the giver of the reward makes good by deeds what the Gnostic, by gnostic choice, had grasped by anticipation through love [ὁ διὰ τοῦ ἐλέσθαι γνωστικῶς διὰ τῆς ἀγάπης φθάσας προείληφεν ὁ γνωστικός]. (*Strom.* 6.9.75.2)

And again: ‘through love the future is already present for him for him’ (*Strom.* 6.9.77.1: κάστιν αὐτῷ δι’ ἀγάπην ἐνεστος ἤδη τὸ μέλλον). It is by ‘the sure comprehension of the future ... in which he is placed’, that the Gnostic ‘by love goes to meet the future. (*Strom.* 6.9.77.1–2). This anticipation is also effected through prayer (e.g. *Strom.* 7.7.43.1, 12.79.2), and is closely associated with the joy that makes the Gnostic’s life a continual ‘holy festival’: ‘the Gnostic rejoices in things present and is glad on account of those things promised as if they were present’, for he knows them by anticipation (*Strom.* 7.7.47.4). The Gnostic’s true existence, his perfected state in love and gnosis, is a proleptic realization of what *is already* his final existence.

But not quite! For all his high praise of the true Gnostic, and his recontextualizing of martyrdom from the ultimate trial to the daily trials, perfection (or completion) is only attained through the shedding of blood. Through the progress made the Gnostic becomes ‘a martyr through love’ (*Strom.* 4.21.130.5 μάρτυς ... δι’ ἀγάπην γένοιτο), but, Clement then adds:

not even thus will he be called perfect in the flesh beforehand [οὐδ’ οὕτως φθάσει τέλειος ἐν σαρκὶ κληθεῖς]; since it is the close of life [ἡ συμπεραίωσις τοῦ βίου] which claims this appellation, when the gnostic martyr has first shown the perfect work and rightly exhibited it [φθάσαντος ἤδη τοῦ γνωστικοῦ μάρτυρος τὸ τέλειον ἔργον ἐνδείξασθαι], and having thankfully shed his blood has yielded up the spirit [παραστήσαι κυρίως δι’ ἀγάπης γνωστικῆς εὐχαριστηθέντος αἵματος παραπεμπομένου τὸ πνεῦμα]; blessed then will he be and truly proclaimed perfect, “that the excellency of the power of God may be of God and not of us” as the apostle says’ (*Strom.* 4.21.130.5; 2 Cor. 4:7).

Perfection lies ahead, even for the perfect Gnostic, in the weakness of death which allows the strength of God to be made manifest and perfect—it is of God, not of us.

One final area of Clement’s reflection on all this should be noted before we turn to Gregory, and that is how he understands the distinction of the sexes within the context of what it is to be human. It is noteworthy that it is in his discussion of gnostic martyrdom in *Stromata* 4 that he provides his most detailed reflection on this. In the course of describing gnostic martyrdom as the acquisition of virtue, Clement is insistent that the same is expected of both men and women: ‘as far as respects human nature, then, the woman (ἡ γύνη) does not possess one nature and the man (ὁ ἀνήρ) exhibit another, but the same ... Accordingly, the woman is to practice temperance and righteousness, and every other virtue, as well as the man, both free and bond, since it follows that one and the same virtue be of the same nature’ (*Strom.* 4.8.58.4–59.1-3). And so, he continues:

Therefore, we do not say that the same nature [τὴν αὐτὴν φύσιν] is of the female [τοῦ θήλεος] as [compared] to the male [τὸ ἄρρεν], inasmuch as she is female. For it is certainly fitting that some difference exist between each of them, by which one of them is female and the other male. Pregnancy and parturition, accordingly, we say, belong to the woman [τῇ γυναικί], inasmuch as she is female [θήλεια], and not inasmuch as she is a human being [ἄνθρωπος]. For if there were no difference between the man [ἀνδρὸς] and the woman [γυναικός], both of them would do and suffer the same things. (*Strom.* 4.8.59.4-5)

<sup>3</sup> *Strom.* 6.7.61.1: σοφία εἴη ἂν ἡ γνώσις, ἐπιστήμη οὐσα καὶ κατάληψις τῶν ὄντων τε καὶ ἐσομένων καὶ παρρηχότων βεβαία καὶ ἀσφαλής, ὡς ἂν παρὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ παραδοθεῖσα καὶ ἀποκαλυφθεῖσα

While both have the same human nature, and are called to the same virtue, ‘the difference regarding to the particularities of the body’ he says again a few sentences later, ‘relate to childbearing and housekeeping’ (*Strom.* 4.8.60.1).

For Clement, however, childbearing (if not housekeeping) is a high-calling, fulfilling the design of God indicated in the blessing to ‘increase and multiply’, so much so that Clement can even speak of the human being becoming like God through the cooperation in the birth of another (*Paed.* 2.10.83.2: κατὰ τοῦτο εἰκὼν ὁ ἄνθρωπος γίνεται τοῦ θεοῦ, καθὼς εἰς γένεσιν ἀνθρώπου ἄνθρωπος συνεργεῖ), so that the womb ‘cooperates with the work of the creator’ (*Paed.* 2.10.93.1: συνεργούσι τῷ δημιουργῷ). And so, he asserts, ‘we must by all means marry, both for our country’s sake, for the succession of children, and, as far as we are able, for the completion of the world’ (*Strom.* 2.23.140.1: τῆς τοῦ κόσμου ... συντελειώσεως)—this latter idea, combined with the other statements, would seem to refer to the completion of the eschatological number, an idea already found in Irenaeus and which is of central importance for Gregory.

Although in these passages Clement continually stresses the equality of virtue expected of men and women, men (males) definitely have the advantage for Clement: while women are ‘to philosophize’ alongside men, males, he claims, are nevertheless superior at everything, unless they have become effeminate (*Strom.* 4.8.62.4), and in turn, in *Strom.* 6, he asserts that despite the fact that souls are neither male nor female and that the sexual difference is removed in the resurrection, the woman, when perfected in virtue, becomes a man:

For souls, by themselves equally souls, are not different, neither male nor female, when they no longer marry nor are given in marriage. And is not the woman translated into man (μετατίθεται εἰς τὸν ἄνδρα), when she is become equally unfeminine (ἀθήλυτος), and manly and perfect (ἀνδρικὴ καὶ τελεία)? (*Strom.* 6.12.100.3)

While clearly set within the context of the virile language of virtue in the ancient world, the scriptural background for Clement would seem to be not Gal 3:28 (alluded to only in *Protrep.* 11.112.3), but Eph. 4:13: the building up of the body of Christ continues, Paul says, ‘until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood [εἰς ἄνδρα τέλειον], to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’. It is likely this verse which is also echoed in the exhortation heard by Polycarp as he approached his martyrdom: ‘Be strong, Polycarp, and act like a man [ἀνδρίζου]’ (*Vit.Pol.* 9.1).

### Becoming Christ: Gregory of Nyssa (and Gal 3:28)

There is no doubt at all that Gregory is also eschatologically oriented. Commenting on Ecclesiastes 1:9 LXX—‘What is it that has come to be? The same as what shall be. And what is it that has been made? The same as shall be made’—Gregory asks, ‘Do you wish to know what it is that came to be?’, and replies: ‘Think what it is that will be, and you will know what has been.’<sup>4</sup> He then continues more fully and clearly:

‘Think, you human being’, he says, ‘what you will become by exalting yourself [σεαυτὸν ὑψώσας] through virtue. If you shape your soul in every respect with good characteristics ... 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 [things], which indeed will truly come to be [τὸ ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις γενόμενον, ὃ γε ἀληθῶς ἐστι γενησόμενον], that which is ‘in the image and likeness of God. (295.8–16)

<sup>4</sup> Ed. J. McDonough and P. Alexander GNO 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 295.6–8: τί ἐστὶ τὸ γενόμενον; νόησον, τί ἐστὶ τὸ ἐσόμενον, καὶ ἐπιγνώσῃ ὃ γέγονε. ET Stuart G. Hall, in idem, ed. *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993), 45–6.

It is by looking to the end, and becoming beautified by exaltation through virtue (ὑψώσας, with its unmistakable allusions back to Isaiah 52:13 and John 3:14; 8:28; 12:34), that we come to know what came to be ‘in the first [things]’ and ‘will truly come to be’ in the future.

This eschatological orientation is one, I would argue, that pervades and structures the treatise that I have been working on for several years: commonly known as Περὶ κατασκευῆς ἀνθρώπου, *De hominis opificio*, *On the Making of Man*, it should, I would argue on the basis of the manuscripts and the content, really be called Περὶ εἰκόνοσ ἀνθρώπου, *On the Human Image of God*. The title *On the Making of Man* seems to have led to a reading of the work which assumes that it deals with how the human being was originally made, the perfection of ‘pre-lapsarian’ Adam (supposedly in chaps 1–15), in which Adam could have multiplied like the angels, that is sexlessly, and then, from chapter 16 onwards, how God added the distinction between male and female in view of Adam’s fall from this prior angelic state (though this is not narrated), resulting in characteristics which will be abandoned when we once again return to our original state in the apokatastasis.

Gregory’s treatise, however, doesn’t really unfold in this straightforwardly linear manner. In fact, it is divided into three main parts. In Chapters 1–15, Gregory gives a beautiful picture of the human being as the apex of creation and, more than that, the very image of God. Gregory then opens Chapter 16 by saying: ‘Let us now take up again the divine saying, “let us make the human being in accordance with our image and likeness”’, and his question now is: where do we in fact see the human being in the image of God? For when we look around, what we in fact see is the pitiable wretchedness of human beings, subject to passion and corruption. This leads him into a long discussion, full of digressions and changes of voice, reflecting on: who the human being, spoken of in Gen 1, in fact is; God’s prevision of the waywardness of the human will and movement; and God’s anticipatory provision for this waywardness. Chapter 30, the only other ‘chapter’ besides 16 to have a heading beginning with ‘contemplation’ (θεωρία), begins, I argue, the third part of the work, which describes the formation of the human being in medical and anatomical terms, in terms of the seed deposited and growing in the womb, emerging into the world of sense-perception, where it now grows in its reasoning faculty—recapitulating the stages in the evolution of the soul described by Moses in Gen 1, as interpreted by Gregory in chap 8 of this work.

In other words, the development of the argument in Gregory’s treatise is not the linear progression of a narrative describing the fall from a pre-lapsarian state to a post-lapsarian one. Rather, we are given three coordinated analyses, which, I argue, mirror those of the *Timaeus*. The main body of Timaeus’s speech, after his introductory prelude (27d5–29d3), is clearly divided into three coordinated parts. The first (29d7–47e2) sets out ‘the things that have been crafted by Intellect’ (47e4: τὰ διὰ νοῦ δεδημιουργημένα): intimations are already given in this part that anticipate what will come later (cf. 34b10, 44c4–5), just as Gregory by way of digression discusses the genesis of evil in the first part of his treatise (at Chapter 12). But then midway through his speech Timaeus announces that his account so far is incomplete and one sided, ‘for this ordered world is of mixed birth: it is the offspring of a union of Necessity and Intellect’, with Intellect persuading Necessity towards what is best; and as such, he must now make a new beginning, so as to give an account of ‘Necessity’ (ἀνάγκη) and the ‘Straying Cause’ (πλανωμένη αἰτία) (48a2–3); this is the subject of the second part of his speech (47e3–69a5). The third part (69a6–92c9) is again signalled likewise: he announces that as all the materials are now ready for construction, ‘from them we are to weave together the remainder of our account; so let us briefly return to our starting point and quickly proceed to the same place from which we arrived at our present position and let us try to put a final head on our story, one that fits with our previous discussion’ (69a7–b2). The bulk of what follows is a detailed psychophysical account of the parts of the body, their functions and purpose, the diseases of body and soul and the need for proper care of each, ending with an account of the differentiation into male and female (90e–92d6) and the appearance of the lower animals.

Besides the many particular points of similarity between the *Timaeus* and Gregory’s treatise, what is most striking is the parallel threefold division of each work, together with the numerous foreshadowings, backtracking, and apparent detours, and also switching between different modes of speech. With this in mind, we can see that what Gregory is doing in *On the Human Image* is not giving a continuous protological narrative of the making of the human being, starting with an initial

completed creation and the ‘prelapsarian’ condition of Adam, to a discussion of the fall and the ensuing ‘postlapsarian’ condition of humanity. Rather Gregory provides us with three coordinated analyses of the human being as the image of God: first, a vision of what the human being looks like, which in turn enables us, secondly, to see our present pitiable condition not as the result of a lost perfection but as oriented towards a goal yet to be attained and embodying a divine, providential pedagogy bringing us towards the initial intention; and, thirdly, how we can see this pattern of growth of the human race in the grand economy of God played out, or recapitulated, in the life of each human being.

### First Part

Gregory’s treatise begins with an ideal description of creation and the human being as the image of God, adorned with virtue and embodied in a body perfectly structured for the activity of the intellect. (*Imag.* 1–15). It also includes a lengthy excursion into the apparent relapse from rational control exhibited in tears, laughter, yawning and dreaming, which provides an occasion for a brief (and deeply embedded in a lengthy discussion about the slackening of rational control in such bodily phenomena) treatment of the genesis of evil (*Imag.* 12–13). However, who the human being described in the first part of the treatise is, Gregory does not say.

### Second Part

But then, noting that the image he has just described is not in fact what we see when looking at actual human beings, Gregory returns again to his starting point, the scriptural verses Gen. 1:26–7, discerning this time a distinction between the image and the prototype inscribed in these verses (*Imag.* 16.1–9). Thus begins a lengthy and complex analysis of the waywardness of human beings, God’s providence, the division into male and female, the arising of the passions, and the time needed to reach the fulness (both intensively and extensively) of the human being that will happen together with the end of time at the universal reconstitution and the transformation of humanity from the corruptible and earthy to the impassible and eternal. The economy of creation is thus for Gregory, as it is for Plato, a pedagogy, God ‘persuading’ human beings by providing them with the occasion, the time, and the means for growth in understanding and virtue.

There are three specific points that I would like to make about this second part of Gregory’s treatise.

**First**, as is well known, Gregory finds the source of the mismatch between what Scripture claims and the empirical reality we see, in the shift between the two clauses of Gen. 1:27,

‘God made [ἐποίησεν]’, it says, ‘the human being, in accordance with the image of God he made it’. The creation of that which came to be ‘in accordance with the image’ has an end [τέλος ἔχει ἢ τοῦ κατ’ εἰκόνα γεγεννημένου κτίσις]; then it makes a repetition [ἐπανάληψιν] of the account of the formation [τοῦ κατὰ τὴν κατασκευὴν λόγου], and says, ‘male and female he made them’. I think it is known to everyone that this is understood to be outside the Prototype, ‘for in Christ Jesus’, as the apostle says, ‘there is neither male nor female’ [Gal 3:28], but the account [ὁ λόγος] says that the human being is indeed divided [διηρησθαι] into these. Therefore the formation of our nature is in a sense twofold [Ὁὐκοῦν διπλῆ τίς ἐστίν ἡ τῆς φύσεως ἡμῶν κατασκευὴ], that being likened to the divine [ἢτε πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ὁμοιωμένη], [and] that being divided according to this difference [ἢτε πρὸς τὴν διαφορὰν ταύτην διηρημένη]; for something like this the account hints at by the arrangement of what is written, first saying, ‘God made the human being, in accordance with the image of God he made it’, and then, adding to what has been said, ‘male and female made he them’, something that is foreign to our conceptions of God. (*De hom.* 16.7–8)

It is important to note that in each clause of Gen. 1:27, the word used for God’s action is the same: Gregory ‘made’ (ἐποίησεν). What it is that is ‘made’ in these clauses, however, is expounded by Gregory with different words.<sup>5</sup> With Gen. 1:27ab, Gregory uses the word ‘creation’ (κτίσις) for ‘that which has come to be [τοῦ ... γεγεννημένου] in accordance with the image’. He does not say that this

<sup>5</sup> Wilson translated all these words simply as ‘create’ or ‘creation’: “‘God created man ...’ There is an end of the creation of that which was made in the image; then it makes a resumption of the account of creation ...’

‘creation’ has ‘come to an end’, but rather ‘has an end’, that is, it has an end in view, a goal or final cause, which is, as he puts it in the next sentence, its Prototype, that is, Christ Jesus. It is very important to register this point: it is Christ who is the Prototype, not Adam, who in fact has not yet been mentioned, either by Scripture or Gregory (until *De hom.* 16.16 and 22.3, in both cases specifying that he is not talking about Adam!). Gregory then takes v.27c as being an ἐπανάληψις of the account of the κατασκευῆ: that is, a ‘repetition’ (not resumption), but now in a different key, not ‘creation’ but ‘formation’. It is our ‘formation’ that is ‘two-fold’, rather than God’s act of creation being in two stages. In his *Hexaemeron*, Gregory argues that God’s act of making is instantaneous, encompassing all that is to be, while what comes into being is ‘manifested’ in proper order and sequence (*Hex.* 64).

The two-foldedness of our formation is explicitly spelled out in the following section, where Gregory presents ‘the great and lofty teaching of Scripture’, that the human being is the ‘midpoint’ of the divine, incorporeal, and intelligent, on the one hand, and on the other the irrational and animal form of life, and that each of these aspects ‘is certainly in all that partakes of human life’; and, further, that in his anthropogony Moses describes how in the human, the intellectual takes precedence, for the image is mentioned first, so that our participation and kinship with the irrational is an ‘accretion’ to the image (ἐπιγεννηματικὴν, not ‘provision for reproduction’ as Dionysius, and then NPNF); all this shows that with regard to the image there is neither male nor female, as there is not in the prototype, Jesus Christ, but that ‘the particularities of human nature’ are to be male and female (*De hom.* 16.9).

The **second** point is that when he comes to spell out further the difference between how the divine archetype and the human image differ, it is not with respect to human existence as male and female, but rather the mutability of created beings, for their very coming into existence from non-being is already a change (*De hom.* 16.12). It is on this basis that Gregory can now respond to the predicament he posed at the beginning of the chapter, and he does so by appealing to the wavering, mutable will of human beings (the equivalent of Timaeus’ ‘straying cause’), foreseen by God in his prevision of and provision for the waywardness of the human will. It is this that leads God to ‘devise for the image the difference of male and female, which no longer looks to the divine archetype but, as was said, assimilates [προσφκέϊωται] to the less rational nature (*De hom.* 16.14).

What is striking about this claim is that it is not only a response to the problem of why we don’t (immediately) see the image of God in human beings, but that it is phrased as an aetiological account for what he has just established as the scriptural teaching regarding the human as a two-fold being, intellectual and corporeal, with ‘the particularities of human nature’ being existence as male and female (*De hom.* 16.9). That is, if the purpose of God is to make a human being according to his image (Gen. 1:26), and in the Prototype there ‘is not male and female’ (Gal. 3:28), why and for what purpose did God *also* make the human being ‘male and female’? That God has done so, and that the human being is such, is not in question: the issue is why? And his answer here is that this assimilation to the less rational is a provision made in anticipation of the divinely foreseen waywardness of the human will (though, of course, this is ultimately circular: it is because we are already both that we can tend towards the irrational and be assimilated to it).

However, this is immediately followed by Gregory registering a change in his mode of his discourse:

The reason [τὴν αἰτίαν] for such a device only those may know who were ‘eyewitnesses’ of the truth ‘and ministers of the Word’ [Luke 1.2]; but we, as far as is possible, by means of some guesses and images picturing the truth [εἰκόνων φαντασθέντες τὴν ἀλήθειαν], do not set forth categorically what comes to mind, but add it in a form of an exercise [ἐν γυμνασίας εἶδει] for our well-disposed hearers. (*De hom.* 16.15)

This is strong language indeed, contrasting greatly with the categorical ‘great and lofty teaching’ given by Scripture a few paragraphs earlier. The ‘exercise’ that he offers, moreover, is not simply his best conjecture at that which cannot ultimately be known except by those who were eyewitnesses, for it is combined with the assertion that he is *not* going to say directly what comes to mind, but instead offer images that ‘fantasize the truth’. Gregory doesn’t always tell us what he actually thinks, just like Clement, who in the introductory paragraphs to his *Stromata* warns the reader: ‘At some things my treatise will hint; on some it will linger; some it will merely mention. I will try to speak imperceptibly,



to exhibit secretly and to demonstrate silently' (*Strom.* 1.1.15.1) (I have yet to come across similarly blunt statements in other authors)

Gregory offers two further aetiological accounts of the relationship between God's prevision and human existence as male and female (*De hom.* 17.4–5 and 22); it is only in the latter where he finally states 'what comes to our mind' (*De hom.* 22.3). The sequence of Gregory's argument over these chapters is, moreover, convoluted, with apparent detours tackling a range of topics before he is prepared to state his position (in the same way that when Timaeus' treats what is only a 'likely story' his account tends to be 'casual and random'; cf. *Tim.* 34c2–4). When he is ready, once his readers are suitably 'exercised', Gregory points out that the words 'increase and multiply and fill the earth' are also directed towards the irrational animals (cf. Gen. 1:22) and as they are only said once the human being has been divided into male and female, we can conclude that it is only in this way, through existence as male and female, that human beings were to increase and multiply, 'since if, before putting on our nature the difference between male and female, he had added the power for 'increase' expressed by this utterance, we should not have needed this form of birth, by which the irrational animals are born. (*De hom.* 22.4): despite all the speculation that the intervening chapters have generated, human beings could never have multiplied otherwise!

The **third** point about this section of Gregory's treatise is that, as is well known, the human being that is the image of God includes all humanity (*De hom.* 16.16–19), not simply as a genus but as 'the entire plenitude of humanity' (ὅλον τὸ τῆς ἀνθρωπότητος πλήρωμα); and this plenitude was, moreover, seen in the prevision of God as a single human being:

The human being manifested together with the first formation of the world [ὁ τε τῆ πρώτῃ τοῦ κόσμου κατασκευῆ συναναδειχθεὶς ἄνθρωπος], and he who shall come to be after consummation of all [ὁ μετὰ τὴν τοῦ παντὸς συντέλειαν γενησόμενος], 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.

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 well 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, as we saw in *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 fullness of humanity' foreseen by God from or in the beginning, the *archē*. Or, as Balthasar more elegantly put it: 'The total Christ is none other than the total humanity'.<sup>6</sup>

### Third part

In his classic work on the *Timaeus*, Cornford notes that while the work as a whole is 'not easy reading ... the physiological and medical chapters towards the end would be repellent to many.'<sup>7</sup> The same would seem to be true of Gregory's lengthy last chapter, the third part of the work; it is conspicuously missing from most treatments of the treatise. Yet, just as it is here that Timaeus pulls together the two parts of his work, and 'puts a final head on his story', so too it is in this last chapter that Gregory bring together his description of the ideal human being given in the first part, and what results from the waywardness of the human will and movement in the second part, to recapitulate his account with a

<sup>6</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995 [1944]), 87.

<sup>7</sup> Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997 [1937]), 20.

medical account of the human being, their coming into life and their growth. Gregory's account is indeed hard-going, as he describes in detail the constitution and workings of the various organs that are needed for life and for the good life. But he pulls himself up short towards the end, noting that his intention was to show that 'the seminal cause of our constitution is neither a soul without body, nor a body without soul'. Rather, in words which echo the words of Clement that we have seen, about 'the workshop of nature' in which the human being is accomplished, Gregory continues by saying that his goal is to show that 'from animated and living bodies a being, living and animated from the first, is generated, and that human nature takes it and cherishes it, 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 goes on to compare 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 nature, the all-contriving, taking from the kindred matter within herself the part that comes from the human being crafts the statue [τὴν γὰρ πάντα τεχνιτεύουσιν φύσιν ἐκ τῆς ὁμογενοῦς ὕλης λαβοῦσαν, ἐν ἑαυτῇ τὸ ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου μέρος δημιουργεῖν ἀνδριάντα φασμέν]. 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 [ἀλλ' ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἂν τέλειον ἦν εἰ μὴ διὰ τῆς κακίας ἢ φύσιν ἐκολοβώθη]. For this reason our sharing in that impassioned and animal-like coming-into-being 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 attributes of the soul, brings to perfection the human being [διὰ τοῦτο ἡ πρὸς τὴν ἐμπαθῆ καὶ ζωώδη γένεσιν κοινωνία οὐκ εὐθὺς ἐκλάμπει ἐν τῷ πλάσματι τὴν θεῖαν εἰκόνα ἐποίησεν ἀλλ' ὁδῶ τιμι καὶ ἀκολουθίᾳ διὰ τῶν ὑλικῶν τε καὶ ζωωδεστέρων τῆς ψυχῆς ἰδιωμάτων ἐπὶ τὸ τέλειον ἄγει τὸν ἄνθρωπον]. (*De hom.* 30.30)

There are two things that need to be carefully considered in this climactic paragraph. First, the 'maiming by evil' that has prevented the end result from being perfect from the beginning. What this refers to is not stated by Gregory. However, it is important to note that it is not 'our nature' (as Wilson translated 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). The 'genesis of evil' is not some primordial event, but rather occurs, Gregory pointed out, whenever the intellect turns downwards towards matter and so receives its shapelessness into itself (*De hom.* 12.9–13), and this, I have suggested, is 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.

The second point is Gregory's striking concluding words: it is not simply that, by our 'sharing in the impassioned and animal-like coming-into-being', the human race reaches the plenitude foreseen by God (cf. *De hom.* 22.4), but that this entails that the human being is brought to perfection in a proper order and sequence, and, Gregory now adds, this happens 'through those more material and animal-

like attributes of the soul'. If it is 'the evil husbandry of the intellect' that has perverted all their motions and impulses shared with the animals into forms of passion not known amongst the animals, it is the intellect which needs training, to raise all these motions so that they too are 'conformed to the beauty of the divine image' (*De hom.* 18. 4–5), so that the beauty of the divine image in the moulded figure can truly shine forth.

To recapitulate: in the first part of the work (chap. 1–15), Gregory has given an ideal vision of the ideal human being. In the second part of the work (chaps 16–29), he gives an analysis of the prevision and provision of God with respect to the wavering inclination of the human will and the evil husbandry of the human intellect, sketching out the economy, or the 'anthropogony', traced in the ascent of nature to the more perfect form of life, on the one hand, 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 co-extensive with, time itself, resulting in the final transformation heralded by Paul (*De hom.* 16–29). In the third part of the work, Gregory describes 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. And so he concludes his treatise with the exhortation, using Paul's words, that it is now time to put away childish things, the old human being, and put on instead the one being renewed in accordance with the image of God.

### Conclusion

Timaeus concludes his speech in *Critias*, with a prayer 'to the god [i.e. the world] who previously of old came to be in reality and just now comes to be in words' (*Crit.* 106a3–4: τῷ δὲ πρὶν μὲν πάλαι ποτ' ἔργῳ, νῦν δὲ λόγοις ἄρτι θεῷ γεγονότι). Timaeus' speech is not, then, simply an account of the formation of the cosmos and the human being within it, but a verbal representation or enactment of its order and harmony. Moreover, by showing 'the reasons and forethought [αἰτίας καὶ προνοίας] of the gods in causing them to be' (44c7), it enables others, through the right nurture of instruction, to calm the irrational movements of their souls and so become 'perfectly whole and healthy' (44b8–c1).

Clement and Gregory, however, reverse this perspective: what was spoken of in Scripture only comes to be at the end. And as such, Clement, at the end of *Stromata* 6, concludes that he has 'moulded, as it were, a statue of the Gnostic' (Καθάπερ οὖν ἀνδριάντα ἀποπλασάμενοι τοῦ γνωστικῆς), showing us the greatness and beauty of his character (*Strom.* 6.18.25). Although Gregory does not (at least in the present treatise) use the anticipatory language of 'prolepsis', he similarly takes an eschatological perspective: it is only at the end that we, individually, attain the statues of image and likeness, and, collectively, fill up the body of Christ, the human being in the image of God. In so doing, both, in their own ways, give us a vision of what it is to be the human image of God, which in turn provides the key for understanding both our current condition and the pedagogy at work in the providence of God, leading us, in the end, to that to which we were originally called.

Their respective accounts of human existence as male and female also differ significantly. In Timaeus' 'likely story' he reports that 'males who lived lives of cowardice or injustice were reborn in the second generation as women' (90e6–91a1), and as such, it is only towards the end of his speech, almost as an afterthought, that Timaeus describes the appearance of women and other animals. For Clement and Gregory, existence as male and female is a God-given framework for the growth towards the fullness of being human. For Clement, procreation 'cooperates' with the Creator in the production of another human being, and also contributes 'to the completion of the world'. For Gregory, the plenitude of humanity, the fullness of the body of Christ, is attained through sexual reproduction (and it was never any other way). For both, when the 'completion of the world' or 'the plenitude of humanity' is reached, marriage and giving in marriage ceases. For what happens thereafter, Clement and Gregory reach for different scriptural intimations: for Clement 'the woman is translated into man', presumably in reference to Eph. 4:13, while Gregory puts together Gen. 1:27 and Gal. 3:28, neither male nor female, but human, having put on Christ, being his body. Other than that this final state is to be the body of Christ, either 'the perfect man' or 'neither male nor female', not much else can really be said. Perhaps we should remain content with the words of Stavrogin, as preserved in

**PROVISIONAL TEXT - 2021 PUSC-ROR Theology Conference**

Dostoevsky's notebooks: "We are, clearly, transitory beings and our existence on earth is, clearly, a process, the uninterrupted existence of a chrysalis transitioning into a butterfly."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Dostoevsky, in appendix to 8<sup>th</sup> volume of sixth printing of *The Demons*, Stavrogin to Shatov; quoted in Bulgakov, *The Sophiology of Death*, essay 1, p.1-2, fn.1.