

Spiritual Formation: Old Wine and New Wineskins

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Ask a group of practical theologians to define ‘spiritual formation’ and you are likely to receive as many varied answers had you asked them to define ‘religious education’! Perspectives vary widely according to religious tradition, and even among those adherents to the same religious system, according to doctrinal emphases, orientation to the culture, and differing perspectives on the role of non-theological disciplines in the task of spiritual formation. The following paper is an attempt to sort through the questions, “What is ‘spiritual formation’? What is its relationship to religious education? The human sciences?” In this sense, the paper is an initial foray into the methodological issues raised by an attempt to engage spiritual formation from within the field of practical theology. Overall, I seek not to define spiritual formation, since there likely isn’t one answer acceptable to most of us, but rather to provide *one* description of spiritual formation that has the potential to appeal to all three major groups of Christian religious educators – Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. In order to accomplish this task, I turn to a group of theologians whose teachings have shaped these three strands of Christianity – i.e. the Patristics – and from within this group, to Gregory of Nyssa.

The life of Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) might be defined as a spiritual legacy, inherited and then bequeathed onto successive generations down to the present day. He is regarded as the most spiritually intuitive of the three Cappadocians (Margerie, 213), and one of the most prolific Patristic theologians. During his bishopric, he taught on Genesis, Exodus, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Song of Songs, the Beatitudes, and the Lord’s Prayer, which have been preserved in the form of commentary and treatise. His other works include *The Life of Moses*, *On Virginity*, *Catechetical Orations*, *On the Making of Man*, and *The Life of Macrina*. Gregory is perhaps most well known today for his relational / social trinitarian theology, developed in cooperation with his brother, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nazianzus, and re-captured by contemporary feminist theologian Catherine LaCugna.

In the first section of the paper, I will describe the relationship between religious education and spiritual formation in three of Gregory’s ‘mystical’ works that were directed to his congregation or other priests under his care—i.e. *The Life of Moses*, *Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, and *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. In order to elicit this intra-disciplinary relationship, I will provide a formal analysis of his hermeneutic and pedagogical method. In the second section of the paper, I will provide a material analysis of these works in order to elicit Gregory’s concept of the soul and its spiritual formation. In the final section, I will create an inter-disciplinary analysis that places ‘old wine’, Cappadocian spirituality, in ‘new wineskins’, contemporary psychological theory, specifically Albert Ellis’ Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy.

1. The relationship between religious education and spiritual formation in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa

At the formal level, Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses* (TLM), *Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms* (TIP), and *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (CSS) facilitate the

process of spiritual formation. That is, his method of interpreting and presenting his educational material seeks to shape the spiritual life of his readers. In this section, I will highlight the inherent transformational potential in Gregory's Scriptural hermeneutic and pedagogical method.

1.1 Gregory's transformational hermeneutic

Gregory's interpretation of sacred texts can be summarized in terms of four Greek concepts—*skopos*, *theoria*, *akolouthia*, and *allegoria*. He repeatedly asserts that the single *skopos* (purpose / intent) of his primary teaching material (Scripture) is to assist us in leading a virtuous life so that we might be transformed into "blessedness"—i.e. divine likeness. The formation of human nature into is a result of its participation in Goodness and Beauty—i.e. God. Scripture both defines and guides us in a life of *arete*, excellence. Gregory writes:

Just as at sea those who are carried away from the direction of the harbor bring themselves back on course by a clear sign, upon seeing either a beacon light raised up high or some mountain peak coming into view, in the same way Scripture by the example of Abraham and Sarah may guide again to the harbor of the divine will those adrift on the sea of life with a pilotless mind (TLM, 1.11).

The *skopos* is achieved by means of *theoria*, contemplation of Ultimate Goodness, Beauty, and Truth. Gregory structures his educational material in such a way to move the reader toward *theoria*. He divides TIP into five sections pertaining to stages of spiritual formation. The initial stages seek to motivate behavioral change in his hearers necessary for them to achieve the final stage, vision of "unsurpassable awe regarding God's grace in human salvation" and cosmic restoration. The structure of TLM fosters this same type of progression within the hearer. The first and shorter section, the *historia*, presents a chronological outline of Moses' life as depicted in Scripture. The second section, *theoria*, presents an allegorical interpretation of the *historia* meant to define and guide the ascent of the individual soul to God.

As a theologian belonging to the Alexandrian school of interpretation, Gregory construes *theoria* as the contemplation of God and Scripture as the instrument that facilitates this contemplation. In contrast to other Alexandrian theologians, particularly Origen, the object of *theoria*, for Gregory, is not Divinity in itself. God ultimately remains hidden to humanity--ineffable and inaccessible. Therefore, the proper object of *theoria* is *akolouthia*, the "necessary connection, link, order, and harmony of all that exists," which in Gregory's hermeneutic, refers to the interconnection of the material sequence of the biblical text and the Divine plan in nature and human history (Margerie, 214-16). For example, Gregory connects the narrative of Moses' life and the accompanying story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and entrance into the Promised Land with God's plan of salvation. This Divine plan is recapitulative and cosmic—i.e. to restore all creation, including nature and humanity, to God's original intent prior to its disfiguration in the 'fall'. In this manner, Gregory's exegesis not only promotes the virtuous life of the individual Christian but embeds the individual's life story within the salvation history of the entire creation, thereby mitigating against overly individualistic contemporary readings.

Gregory's primary means of connecting the material sequence of the text to the Divine plan for creation is *allegoria*, "the spiritual understanding which corresponds to the history" (TLM, 1.14-.15).¹ Imitating the life of "an ancient Chaldean nourished by the daughter of an

¹ As demonstrated by Frances Young, in her book *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, the typical classification of Alexandrian, Antiochene, and Latin as allegorical, typological, and literal interpretations is

Egyptian” is impossible if interpretation remains at the literal-historical level. After outlining Moses’ life in chronological sequence, Gregory writes, “Now we must *adapt* the life which we have called to mind to the aim we have proposed for our study so that we might gain some benefit for the virtuous life from the things mentioned” (1.77). In the following section, *theoria*, Gregory uses allegory extensively in order to enable his hearers to imitate Moses as a model of perfection. Furthermore, he employs allegory to elicit spiritual meaning from seemingly insignificant textual details. For example, in his interpretation of the priestly vestments, Gregory writes, “[The very names of the clothing] clearly illustrate that it is not the perceptible clothing which is traced by the history but a certain adornment of the soul woven by virtuous pursuits” (2.190). So the golden bells on the ephod refer to faith, the pomegranates designate the conscience, and the tassles symbolize human striving for virtue (2.192-.194).

1.2 *Paranesis through inter-textuality*

Paranetic letters and treatises in ancient Greek culture exhorted individuals to embody morality. Frances Young notes that Patristic “paranesis was built up out of scriptural material in way that presupposed that scriptural texts provide divine teaching of a moral nature” (1997, 203). More specifically, Patristic *paranesis* was created through intertextuality—Scriptural quotation, allusion to biblical texts and/or imagery—and mimesis of biblical personages portrayed as ‘moral types’ (1997, ch. 10).

Young describes the layering of biblical allusions as ‘collage’, though I prefer the term ‘bricolage’. In pop culture studies, bricolage refers to the process whereby youth subcultures utilize and combine products in ways unintended by their producers, thereby subverting the intended effect of the products. Bricolage enables youth to form their identity and sense of meaning through an eclectic intertextuality. Similarly, Patristic exegetes combined and layered scriptural imagery and texts in order to shape the identity of their hearers. In other words, scriptural bricolage functions as an identity-forming discourse. The following quote, which alludes to 2 Corinthians 12:7, Proverbs 17:7, and Jeremiah 9:4, provides a characteristic example of Gregory’s scriptural bricolage:

For “angel” signifies not only an angel of God but also *an angel of Satan*. And we call “brother” not only a good brother but also a bad brother. So the Scripture speaks of the good, *Brothers are proved in distress*, and of the opposite, *Every brother will utterly supplant* (TLM, 2.53).

Additionally, Patristic treatises promote moral formation through mimesis of biblical personages, (as mentioned above). In her discussion of the aretegenic² function of doctrine, Ellen Charry writes, “Excellent character doesn’t just happen—it is formed, crafted among other

overly rigid and somewhat anachronistic. For our purposes here it is simply important to note that nearly all Patristic scholars used allegory as a means of both explaining contradictory or offensive passages and promoting the spiritual transformation of their listeners. The difference lay in their emphases on maintaining the narrative coherence of the literal-historical sense. Alexandrians, such as Gregory, were less concerned with the sequence of the story and the coherence of the biblical narrative as a whole in their allegorizing. Young classifies Antiochene spiritual interpretation as ‘ikonik’ mimesis, in which the mirroring of the deeper meaning of the text is taken as coherent whole, and Alexandrian spiritual interpretation as ‘symbolic’ mimesis, in which words are used as symbols or tokens that refer to other realities (ch.8).

² “Aretegenic” is a neologism coined by Charry to describe the formative intent of pre-modern doctrinal treatises and commentaries. To be ‘aretegenic’ is to be ‘conducive to virtue’.

things by *literary or visual examples that companion*, expand one's world, stimulate the imagination, engage the emotions, sharpen discernment, and promote practice vicariously" (1997, 26; emphasis mine). The mimetic function of biblical characters, specifically Moses in Gregory's treatise, is analogous to the psychological function of an 'Adult Guarantor'. In Erik Erikson's description of the developmental tasks of adolescence—identity vs. role confusion—and specifically his description of Martin Luther's adolescent development, he refers to the importance of an Adult Guarantor in the adolescent's successful development of a stable sense of self.³ The Adult Guarantor is similar to a transitional object, i.e., an individual who provides security, guidance. (S)he is a moral and spiritual exemplar internalized during the tumultuous years of adolescence. Two quotes that serve as bookends for Gregory's treatise on Moses illustrate the significance of the adult guarantor for those whose identity is transformed through participation in the Good. In his prologue, Gregory writes:

Let us put forth Moses as our example for life in our treatise. First we shall go through in outline his life as we have learned it from divine Scriptures. Then we shall seek out the spiritual understanding which corresponds to the history in order to obtain suggestions of virtue. Through such understanding we may come to know the perfect life for men (TLM, 1.15).

In his conclusion, he affirms the same: "These things concerning the perfection of the virtuous life, O Caesarius, man of God, we have briefly written for you, tracing in outline like a pattern of beauty the life of the great Moses so that each one of us might copy the image of the beauty which has been shown to us by imitating his way of life" (2.319).

1.3 Polemical theology and philosophy in the service of spiritual formation

Most contemporary (Protestant) interpreters of historic Christian texts focus exclusively on doctrine and apologetics. In contrast, Ellen Charry has demonstrated that the primary objective of pre-modern theological treatises was the spiritual transformation of the hearer. Confusing to us moderns (and post-moderns) is the fact that our ancient interlocutors did not differentiate spiritual (trans)formation from religious education. That is, upon studying theological texts written prior to modernity, we discover that apologetics, moral exhortation, dogmatic exegesis, pastoral care, etc. occur simultaneously within the same work (Charry 1997), yet always for the purpose of individual and corporate formation. Thus Gregory embeds his polemical theology and inter-disciplinary concerns in his scriptural exegesis in a manner that enhances the spiritual transformation of his readers through growth in virtue.

Patristic scholar, Ronald Heine has interpreted *The Life of Moses* in light of Gregory's debate with Origenism and Eunomianism. Origen argued that the 'fall' of humanity was the result of 'satiety'. That is, both the devil and humanity became 'satisfied', perhaps even bored, in their participation in God and hence attempted to usurp God. In contrast, Gregory constantly affirms that growth in perfection is never-ending for humanity, and related to this, human desire for God is never completely satisfied.⁴ Eunomius asserted that God could be known fully by

³ See Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1958, 1962).

⁴ Heine writes, "The life of Moses then shows, in Gregory's mind, that one can continually attain ever greater heights in the virtuous life without experiencing the fateful 'satiety' that Origen saw as causing the fall. Gregory's statements with regard to Moses' progress are often expressed as feigned amazement that one who has gone so far as

humanity, a proposition attacked directly in Gregory's treatise, *Contra Eunomius* and indirectly in TLM. In the latter, Gregory utilizes *allegoria* and *theoria* in order to emphasize God's incomprehensibility. God is 'ineffable', shrouded in 'darkness', 'impenetrable darkness', 'unknown and unseen', mysterious, 'inaccessible' in His glory, 'Invisible', infinite, and transcends all human knowledge (1.46, 2.34ff, 2.152, 2.163, 2.169, 2.312, 2.315). What is significant about the underlying polemical theology is the fact that Gregory, like other Patristic theologians, does not separate pastoral (spiritual / aretegenic) and doctrinal concerns. Spirituality and orthodoxy are inter-dependent. Education in the Christian tradition occurs alongside of, and for the sake of, spiritual formation.

Similarly, Gregory addresses the theological debate regarding the proper use of philosophy and its relationship to Scripture / doctrine. Most Patristic religious educators were committed to relating their theology to secular disciplines, and consequently they experienced tension between the intellectual culture and the community of faith. On the one hand, they sought to justify the legitimacy of their beliefs, and more specifically, the content of Scripture, within a philosophical culture. On the other, they sought to justify their adaptation of Greek philosophy to members of the emerging theological community of discourse. Gregory enters this debate without saying so.

Gregory attributes numerous benefits to secular education and clarifies the relationship between Christian theology and philosophy sporadically throughout TLM. According to Gregory, philosophy, analogous to the reed basket that protected Moses from the torrents of the Nile, provides wisdom and guidance in turbulent times (TLM, 2.7ff). Philosophy also can contribute to the process of spiritual formation. "Indeed moral and natural philosophy may become at certain times a comrade, friend, and companion of life to the higher way..." (2.37). However, philosophy, i.e., 'profane knowledge', must be accompanied by the "nourishment of Church's milk, which would be her laws and customs" (TLM, 2.12). Further, if there is conflict between philosophy and divine teaching, the ascending soul must not only give precedence to divine learning but also correct inaccuracy in other sources of knowledge (2.17). While Werner Jaeger claims that "the entire work [TLM] serves to defend Gregory's use of Greek philosophy as a basis for theological speculation and to clarify the relationship of the Christian religion to the classical tradition in general" (1965, 134), it seems more accurate to say that Gregory defends himself without subverting his overall aretegenic intent.

To summarize, Gregory of Nyssa's exegetical works, particularly *The Life of Moses*, promotes spiritual formation at the formal (methodological) level. He employs a transformational hermeneutic, characterized by *skopos*, *theoria*, *allegoria*, and *akolouthia*, and he fosters paranesis through inter-textuality and mimesis of biblical characters. His implicit polemical theology and clarification of the relationship between the Christian tradition and philosophy serve the purpose of spiritual formation.

2. The dynamics of spiritual formation

In this section of the paper, I turn to a material analysis of Gregory's educational material. I 'tease out' his concept of the self, which I have labeled his 'theological psychology'

Moses can still desire to go one. The purpose, of course, is to show that even when one has gone this far, he still finds no limit nor lack of desire for more" (106-7).

and the multi-faceted ascent of the soul, which I have designated as his ‘spiritual formation of the self’.

2.1 Gregory’s Theological Psychology

Gregory’s theological psychology is a blend of neo-Platonic and biblical terminology. Platonic premises adopted and “Christianized” by Gregory include: (1) the goodness of being, specifically the goodness of God; (2) evil as emanating from human choice; (3) the beauty of being, specifically Divine Being; (4) beauty and goodness as the ultimate object of human desire; (5) beauty and goodness attained by life of restraint; and (6) the way upward as a return to one’s true origins (Meredith 1999, 7-8). As delineated below, he modifies these philosophical ideals with Pauline theology in his description of the human soul, the *imago dei* and its relationship to existential freedom, and in his ontology.

The human soul, according to Gregory, is composed of two primary parts, the rational and non-rational. The non-rational is divided further into the spirited and the appetitive. The rational part of the soul is what we would call the ‘mind’ or ‘intellect’. Its function is to rule both the spirited, i.e., the emotions, and the appetitive, i.e., sensuality and physical desires. This tri-partite, ordered division of the soul is depicted most vividly in Gregory’s spiritual interpretation of the Passover. He writes:

Safety and security consist in marking the upper doorpost and the side posts of the entrance with the blood of the lamb. While in this way Scripture gives us through figures a scientific understanding of the nature of the soul, profane learning also places it before the mind, dividing the soul into the rational, the appetitive and the spirited. Of these parts we are told that the spirit and the appetite are placed below, supporting on each side the intellectual part of the soul, while the rational aspect is joined to both so as to keep them together and to be held up by them, being trained for courage by the spirit and elevated to the participation in the Good by the appetite (TLM, 2.96).

A passage from Gregory’s treatise, *On Virginity*, further substantiates the autocratic role of the intellect. The rational part of the soul, i.e. the mind, is “the ‘master’ and steward of our tabernacle’ [and its objective] is ‘to arrange everything within us, and to put each particular faculty of the soul, which the Creator has fashioned to be our implement or our vessel, to fitting and noble uses’” (Heine, 223).

In his definition of the soul, Gregory modifies Platonic psychology in that he does not automatically label the physical and nonphysical passions as detrimental to the human being. They ‘support’ and ‘hold up’ the intellectual part of the soul. In other words, “the passions are not inherently evil. Each of the two passionate parts of the soul can have a positive function” (Heine, 224). When rightly directed, the appetitive desires propel the individual toward participation in God. In this regard, sensuality is an aspect of the *imago dei*, a necessary component in the process of spiritual formation. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Gregory describes the Divine nature in terms of ‘passionate desire’. God woos the Church and the individual soul with lavish praise and adornment. This expression of Divine desire ignites passionate longing within the soul so that the individual perpetually seeks God.

The passions become problematic when the proper order of the soul is inverted—i.e. when the spirited or appetitive parts assert authority over, and thereby gain control of, the

rational part. Again, the body is not inherently evil; rather, the potential for evil lies within the soul. Continuing with the metaphor of the blood on the doorposts, Gregory writes, “But if this arrangement should be upset and the upper become the lower—so that if the rational falls from above, the appetitive and spirited disposition makes it the part trampled upon—then the destroyer slips inside” (TLM, 2.98). Thus, the inversion of the soul leads to intra- and inter-personal disorderliness and psychological regression. In reference to the story of the Hebrew’s creation of the golden calf, Gregory writes: “It was then that the people, like a little child who escapes the attention of his pedagogue, were carried along into disorderliness by uncontrolled impulses, and banding together against Aaron, forced the priest to lead them in idolatry” (TLM, 2.58).

Like most religious educators, Gregory has his ‘pet peeves’, particular forms of disorder that he warns against repeatedly and that his hearers are most susceptible to—lack of moderation, specifically gluttony; licentiousness; arrogance; and, envy. Arrogance and envy are the most destructive forms of disorder. The former causes a descent of the soul, in contrast to its proper upward movement toward the Beauty and Goodness of God (TLM, 2.280). The latter is the “congenital malady in the nature of man” (TLM, 1.61), the primal sin of humanity. “Envy is the passion which causes evil, the father of death, the first entrance of sin, the root of wickedness, the birth of sorrow, the mother of misfortune, the basis of disobedience, the beginning of shame.”

Despite its potential for disorder, humanity has an inborn desire for Goodness and Beauty. According to Gregory, this desire reflects the true essence of the soul. Yet each individual chooses whether or not to act in accordance with her true essence. Human free will is the distinguishing mark of the *imago dei*. God, the archetype of freedom, has granted each soul the freedom to choose Good, i.e., the Real, over against Evil, i.e., the Unreal.⁵ “He who made man for the participation of His own peculiar good, and incorporated in him the instincts for all that was excellent... would never have deprived him of that most excellent and precious of all goods; I mean the gift implied in being his own master, and having a free will (Catechetical Orations, quoted in Heine, 51).⁶

Though made in the image of God and for the purpose of participation in Divine Being, humanity nevertheless is ontologically distinct and separated from Divinity. Humankind is finite, mutable, and knowable, whereas God is infinite, immutable, and incomprehensible. Though the soul bears the impress of Divinity and finds its fulfillment in participation in Divinity, God remains ineffable, inaccessible. Gregory writes, “[T]hat which is sought [God] transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Whereas John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, No one has ever seen God, thus asserting that knowledge of divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature” (TLM, 2.163; cf. 1.46-47; 1.56; 2.217-218).

Here again Gregory borrows a neo-Platonic concept and adjusts it in accordance with his theology. Neo-Platonic philosophy denigrated mutability because of its close association with passion, matter and evil. Neither physical matter nor desire are inherently evil for Gregory. The soul’s progressive participation in Divinity is a necessary form of mutability. He writes, “The

⁵ Gregory links the ‘unreality’ of evil to his theological psychology. For him, evil is the absence of good, and it has no ontological existence apart from human choice. “It is evident that nothing evil can come into existence apart from our free choice” (TLM, 2.88).

⁶ The *imago dei* as residing in human free will is expressed Gregory’s his allegorical interpretations of Pharaoh, the Egyptians, the Hebrews, and Moses as well (TLM, 2.1, 2.5-6, 2.74, 2.86).

life of Moses is interpreted as always moving forward in the good, hence always changing, but never alternating between good and bad, hence stable in the good” (Heine, 59).

In summary, Gregory’s theological psychology is marked by the following: a tripartite definition of the soul; overcoming of Platonic body-soul dualism; a description of the passions that plague the disordered soul; the *imago dei* as primarily residing in humanity’s freedom of choice; and, a clear ontological division between humanity and Divinity. The aretogenic functions of this psychology will become clearer when discussing the spiritual formation of the self below. However, at this point, it is fair to say that Gregory’s theological psychology presents a robust and ennobled self. The self is like God. The telos of the self’s existence is participation in the Goodness and Beauty of God, thereby being transformed into blessedness. And, the self has freedom to choose one’s course in life, be it toward virtue or vice.

2.1 *Spiritual Formation of the Self*

In his *Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms* and *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Gregory defines the process of spiritual formation in terms of stages. In TIP, he proposes five distinct stages of the spiritual life: (1) separation from evil; (2) meditation on Scripture; (3) consideration of reality according to God’s perspective, or in Pauline language, acquiring the mind of Christ; (4) cognitive dissassociation from worldly affairs; and, (5) the attainment of unsurpassable awe regarding God’s grace in saving humanity and restoring the cosmos. Gregory collapses these into three stages in CSS : (1) moral behavior; (2) renunciation of transitory things; and, (3) mystical union with God. Numerous Patristic scholars (Rowan Greer, Jean Danielou, and Werner Jaeger) also suggest that the three theophanies in TLM are analogous to the three stages of mystical ascent in Origen’s commentary on the Song of Songs. However, others such as Ronald Heine, persuasively argue that the theophanies represent dimensions of the spiritual life that persist throughout Moses’ ascent toward God.⁷

While we cannot know for sure whether Gregory ultimately conceived of spiritual formation in terms of stages, dimensions, or merely dynamics, he does present spiritual formation as an eternal process characterized by *epektasis*, “perpetual progress in the knowledge and love of God” (Greer, 88). Since the human soul is ontologically distinct from the Divine Being, it cannot be satisfied in its search for God. God is infinite Goodness and Beauty, never exhausted by human participation. “But every desire for the Good which is attracted to that ascent constantly expands as one progresses in pressing on to the Good. This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him” (TLM, 2.238-.239; cf. 2.242). *Epektasis* is not guaranteed, however. Divine Goodness and Beauty has no limit of its own, but individuals often falter in their participation in it. The immediate consequence is a descent of the soul. “[S]topping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil” (TLM, 1.6).

Therefore, spiritual formation necessitates rigor and austerity, a “ceaseless struggle” to orient the soul’s freedom of choice properly. Again Gregory describes this ceaseless struggle via a combination of neo-Platonic and Pauline terminology. It is a struggle against ‘unruly passions’, i.e. sensuous pleasures and lust. It involves ‘mortification of the flesh’, the intentional practice of repentance, a ‘cruciform life’. Gregory admonishes his readers to “resist the gnawings

⁷ Heine writes: “This is made obvious (1) by the listing of Moses’ progress interspersed throughout the *theoria* section, (2) by specific statements about Moses’ advance as Gregory introduces new events in his life, and (3) by the general vocabulary of ascent and progress with which the *theoria* section is saturated” (100).

of desire” by constantly looking to the cross of Christ, our spiritual medicine (TLM, 2.277). “To look to the cross means to render one’s whole life dead and crucified to the world, unmoved by desire” (2.274). Essentially, Gregory is advocating a life of continuous self-restraint rather than self-indulgence. In numerous instances, his description of self-discipline is austere, reminding contemporary readers of extreme ascetic practices practiced throughout portions of Church history. For example, the sandals worn by the Israelites departure from Egypt “are the self-controlled and austere life which breaks and crushes the points of the thorns and prevents sin from slipping inside unnoticed” (TLM, 2.107). Likewise, the pomegranates on the priest’s ephod signify “the philosophical life, [which] although outwardly austere and unpleasant, is yet full of good hopes when it ripens” (TLM, 2.193).

Gregory’s ascetic emphasis springs from his pastoral desire to protect the souls of those whom he leads not only from their own ‘fleshly desires’ but also from the evil one. He believes that a spiritual battle is waged against the ascent of every individual soul. The evil one corrupts individuals by attracting their attention away from heaven and toward the earth—i.e. material pleasure and wealth. Since this temptation continues throughout temporal existence, Gregory claims that we must rigorously adorn the soul with virtues that repel the adversary. Moreover, God provides assistance in this process. God is a fortress of protection (2.292). As God sent the cloud to guide the Hebrews, so God sends the Holy Spirit to guide and protect those ascending to God. Since Gregory has a synergistic view of Divine and Human agency, this Divine assistance is given only to those who are “worthy,” who correctly live the life of virtue and submit themselves to unrelenting training (2.44).

2.2.2 Knowledge of, and Participation in, Divine Being

Purification of the soul by means of ascesis is followed by the apprehension of True Being. The path to knowledge is purity, which Gregory illustrates vividly in his allegorical of two theophanies, Moses’ vision of the burning bush and his ascent into the Darkness on Mt. Sinai. God’s command that Moses remove his sandals symbolizes the removal of soulish impurity. This spiritual cleansing is a prerequisite for interaction with the Divine Presence, symbolized by the burning bush. Similarly, Moses’ crossing of the Red Sea prior to his ascent on Sinai symbolizes emotional and cognitive transformation.

He who would approach the knowledge of things sublime must first purify his manner of life from all sensual and irrational emotion. He must wash from his understanding every opinion derived from some preconception and withdraw himself from his customary intercourse with his own companion, that is, with his sense perception... (2.157)

Proper knowledge of God requires contemplation, i.e. persistent meditation on the spiritual meaning of Scripture, the ‘glasses’ that enable humanity to apprehend True Being. Contemplation is not merely a sensory perception but ongoing spiritual discernment. Gregory writes, “The contemplation of God is not effected by sight and hearing, nor is it comprehended by any of the customary perceptions of the mind” (2.153-157). As a result, God imprints virtue on the soul (2.147), empowers the soul (1.89), and creates trust in Divine power (1.169, 1.179), all of which foster the ongoing recapitulation of the dynamics of spiritual formation of the self. In this regard, we might say that spiritual formation is a cyclical process.

Knowledge of God through contemplation and preceded by purification leads to the soul's participation in Divine Being. As mentioned previously, *participatio dei* is a motif that saturates Gregory's mystical writings. It suggests mutual indwelling, attachment, spiritual union, and it is closely related to the Greek concept of *apatheia*. Since passion is a reflection of the *imago dei* for Gregory, *apatheia* does not imply the elimination of desire. Instead, "apatheia is a habitual state of grace, that is to say, participation of the soul in the divine life. It has a supremely positive character and does not consist of the elimination of passions as such; rather, apatheia coincides with the disappearance of vicious passions, or a mortification which accompanies the resurrection" (Jaeger, 20). *Apatheia* involves both upward ascent of the soul and the downward descent of God. *Apatheia* is an emanation of the divine life into the soul, which thereby animates the soul and transforms it into an icon of God. (Jaeger, 21). Because the self is formed into God's image, *apatheia* enables us to know God in our own souls. True knowledge of God, then, may be obtained through contemplation on Scripture, biblical characters, living spiritual mentors, and introspection.

To summarize, the spiritual formation of the self embedded in the content and method of Gregory of Nyssa's religious education is a multi-faceted, recapitulative, ever-increasing ascent of the soul to God. It involves 'strenuous practice' and 'diligence' coupled with providential care and guidance from God; active contemplation, right thinking, and participation in the very life of God. Obedience, beholding God, and attachment to God function together to transform the soul into blessedness.

3. Critical conversation between spiritual formation and psychological theory

Very few practical theologians would be content merely to re-pristinate a description of spiritual formation embedded in ancient religious texts. As members of an evolving discipline, we are committed to critical evaluation and cross-disciplinary dialogue in the developing norms for particular religious practices. As noted in the first section of this paper, Patristic religious educators, including Gregory of Nyssa, also sought to relate their theology to the dominant educational discipline of their era, philosophy, though of course in a more rudimentary fashion. In keeping with both Gregory's affirmation of, and dialogue with, secular disciplines, and the aims of practical theology, I now will compare and contrast Gregory's theological psychology and spiritual formation of the self with the personality theory and psychological transformation of the self proposed by Albert Ellis' Rational-Emotive-Behavior Therapy (REBT).

3.1 An Overview of REBT

Rational-Emotive-Behavior Therapy is a form of psychoanalysis developed by Albert Ellis in the 1950s. Concerned with the ineffectiveness of insight-oriented psychotherapy derived from depth psychology, Ellis turned to ancient philosophy, particularly Epictetus (c. 50-130 A.D.) and Marcus Aurelius, for insight on the human condition. Consequently, he established a theory of personality that gives a primary role to cognition in the development of emotional and behavioral dysfunction. According to Ellis, irrational beliefs, often manifest in self-imperatives ('musts'), lead to emotional disturbances (anxiety, depression, etc.) and dysfunctional behaviors (addiction, violence, phobias, etc.). The alleviation of emotional and behavioral distress is dependent upon challenging and transforming false beliefs.

Irrational beliefs are the products of both nature and nurture. While people have an inherent potential for both rationality and irrationality, culture, familial background, and early childhood experiences *may* increase the propensity for destructive thinking. Ultimately, however, neurosis is the result of neither heredity nor environment. “No matter how defective people’s heredity may be, and no matter what trauma they may have experienced, the *main* reason they usually now overreact or underreact to adversities (at point A) is that they *now* have some dogmatic, irrational, unexamined beliefs (at point B)” (Ellis 2000, 170).

REBT is also known as the ABCDE theory of disturbance. A (Adversities / Activating events) coupled with B (irrational Beliefs) lead to C (dysfunctional emotional and behavior Consequences). The therapist helps the client to recognize and D (Dispute) B (irrational Beliefs) with the eventual result of E (Effective new life philosophies). The therapeutic transformation of the self occurs at the cognitive, emotive and behavioral dimensions of the self. Clients alter irrational beliefs, receive unconditional positive regard from the therapist, and learn to take risks and control emotional stimuli (Ellis 2000, 7-8). REBT provides clients with three insights that facilitate this three-tiered change. First, clients recognize the self-defeating consequences of irrational beliefs. Second, they recognize that their present emotional disturbance precedes from their own “active reinforcement” of destructive beliefs, particularly their “deifications or devilifications of themselves and others.” Third, clients realize the necessity for intentionally confronting their irrational beliefs and then choosing to act in accordance with new beliefs prior to emotional alleviation (Ellis 2000, 170).

While these insights are an important component of REBT, its success is predicated upon clients’ “self-discipline and self-direction.” Clients are expected to complete weekly homework assignments—e.g. reading, journalizing, assertiveness training, and experiments that test certain core beliefs—with the goal of confronting and changing irrational thought patterns. The therapist’s role is secondary, as well as largely educational and practical. During counseling sessions, the therapist actively challenges irrational beliefs and assists the client in developing strategies to continue this process outside of the session. The quality of the therapist-client relationship is less significant than in other forms of psychotherapy, particularly those that seek transformation of the self through de-repression of unconscious material, transference, and internalization of the therapist.

3.2 Comparing REBT’s theory of personality and Gregory’s theological psychology

REBT and Gregory’s theological psychology have a similar philosophical foundation—i.e. a combination of Aristotle, neo-Platonism and Stoicism—though their terminology is significantly dissimilar. Gregory’s terminology is a combination of neo-Platonism and Pauline theology, while REBT is couched in modern psychological discourse. More significantly, they belong to two different disciplines (theology and psychology), each with its own objectives and methodological criteria. While there is overlap in subject matter, there is also distinction. Psychology’s object of study is the human being, specifically its intra-psychic and inter-personal dimensions. Theology’s object of study is the Divine Being, specifically its relationship all of creation, and its implications for human relationality. As a theory of personality, REBT addresses inter-relatedness of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of the self. Nyssa’s theological psychology addresses intra- and inter-personal aspects of the self as they affect horizontal relationality (human-human) and vertical relationality (human-Divine).

In spite of these significant disciplinary and cultural differences, Ellis and Nyssa both propose a tri-partite division of the self—rational, emotional, behavioral and rational, spirited, and appetitive. Gregory’s description is far less explicit than Ellis’ theory, as might be expected. Unfortunately, he does not clarify the function of the spirited and appetitive parts of the soul, though as mentioned above, they refer respectively to the emotions and bodily sensations. This deviates somewhat from Ellis’ behavioral dimension of the self, though most cognitive-oriented theories connect the emotions with stimuli received through sensory (bodily) perception.

Gregory’s theological psychology and Ellis’ REBT grant primacy to the rational dimension of the self. According to Gregory, the rational part of the soul rules the non-rational parts, i.e., the spirited and appetitive. Likewise, Ellis claims that cognitive patterns determine emotional health and functional behavior. Our ancient theologian and contemporary psychologist agree that each individual has an inherent potential for both rationality and irrationality, order and disorder. Irrationality and disorder are the result of human free will. REBT describes irrationality as the self-destructive interpretation of events in one’s life and the active reinforcement of, i.e., indoctrination into, unrealistic, illogical self-concepts. For Gregory, disorder results not so much from wrong cognition as much as the choice to allow emotion and bodily desire to over-ride the rational self. Furthermore, the self’s regression into disorder, and conversely the self’s progression into goodness and beauty, are influenced by outside forces, i.e., the “evil one” and God. In either case, free will is the determining factor in psychological health and spiritual formation.

3.3 Comparing REBT’s psychological transformation and Gregory’s spiritual formation

Gregory of Nyssa and Albert Ellis propose similar patterns of transformation related to the affinities in their constructions of the self. Their primary divergences, again, emerge from the fact that while they both address the psychological level of reality, Gregory also, and primarily, addresses the spiritual level of reality. By avoiding theological pronouncements, Ellis remains within the bounds of own discipline. Not surprisingly, he expresses skepticism about spirituality, moral absolutes, and any hope of godliness within the human subject. He writes:

REBT looks skeptically at anything mystical, devout, transpersonal, or magical, when these terms are used in the strict sense. It believes that reason itself is limited, ungodlike, and unabsolute...it does not believe that people can transcend their humanness and become superhuman. They can become more adept and competent, but they still remain *fallible* and in no way godly! (Ellis 2000, 179-80).

For Gregory, humans always remain human. The ontological divide remains. However, true humanity is a reflection of Divinity. Spiritual formation is a process of growing into godliness. That which is truly rational is grounded in the Divine Goodness, Beauty, and Truth.

Second, Nyssa and Ellis predicate personal change upon the acquisition of knowledge / insight. In order to alleviate emotional disturbance and behavioral dysfunction, REBT facilitates transformation of the client’s self-concept, expectations, and thought processes. Similarly, Cappadocian spiritual formation requires acquisition of knowledge, specifically knowledge of Divine Being. Rationality, however, is defined pragmatically by Ellis and theologically by Nyssa. In treatment, Ellis encourages his clients to adopt a simple version of the scientific method in order to test the validity of their beliefs. If their beliefs are proven to cause either

intra- or inter-personal distress, they are relinquished. “[A]t the core rationality is not really judged by the truth content of the assertion, but rather by the pragmatic or functional impact of that belief; if a belief helps you, it is rational” (Jones, 118). In contrast, Gregory’s notion of rationality is defined by its alignment with Truth, Beauty, and Goodness—i.e. Divinity—as revealed by applying his transformational hermeneutic to sacred texts.

Third, the REBT therapist’s educational and mentoring function is analogous to the role of Scripture, specifically biblical characters, and religious educators such as Gregory. In a sense, the therapist functions as an Adult Guarantor, as does Moses’ life, by guiding others into right thinking / proper knowledge. Stanton Jones notes that the ‘absolutizing’ and ‘musturbation’⁸ condemned by REBT is similar to pride, self-aggrandizement, and narcissism condemned by Scripture. Both Nyssa and Ellis are concerned with these postures toward the self because they create intra-psychic disturbance, though Nyssa’s fundamental concern is the consequent descent of the soul. Moreover, REBT may *eradicate* guilt by rationalizing and minimizing the individual’s mistakes, Gregory’s process of spiritual formation may *enhance* guilt through vivid depiction of the destruction and offensiveness of sin—e.g. envy as vulture-like cannibalism—in order to incite remorse and repentance.

A fourth ‘similarity in dissimilarity’ in Nyssa and Ellis is their emphasis on human agency. REBT requires active appropriation of skills learned in therapy. A core objective of REBT is the client’s recognition that insight alone will not correct irrational beliefs. Instead, diligence, repetition of new thought patterns, and homework assignments are necessary ingredients for transformation (Enfield 1994, 280). Similarly, Gregory’s spiritual formation of the self involves active imitation of biblical characters, constant orientation of the will toward God, intentional mortification of the flesh, in short, rigorous self-discipline. However, human freedom is supported by Divine assistance in Gregory’s schema. Human existence itself is contingent upon the gracious providence of God. Gregory writes, “For even if understanding looks upon any other existing things, reason observes in absolutely none of them the self-sufficiency by which they could exist without participation in true Being” (TLM, 2.25). In stark contrast, Ellis claims that undue dependence upon another is irrational. It contributes to emotional disturbance and behavioral dysfunction. Therefore REBT stresses the importance of unconditional positive regard in the therapeutic relationship, but it opposes clients’ dependence upon another individual or transcendent being.

Finally, it is important to note that Ellis’ concept of rationality is truncated in comparison to that proposed by Gregory. In REBT, cognitive change occurs via the process of logical disputation, often enacted with the aid of the therapist, and active re-framing. Change in the rational dimension of the self results in transformation in the emotional and behavioral dimensions. For Gregory, active contemplation and the attainment of true knowledge is not separate from participation in Divine Being. That is, the spiritual formation of the self involves cognition and personal attachment. Knowledge and love are inextricable. Beholding and apprehending Truth, Beauty and Goodness leads to mutual indwelling of God and humanity. Divine mirroring of the human soul transforms the soul into blessedness. Even though God, at one level is ineffable, the soul sees the Unseen: “And the bold request [specifically of Moses, generically of all who ascend to God] which goes up the mountain of desire asks this: to enjoy the Beauty not in mirrors and reflections but face to face. The divine voice granted what was

⁸ Ellis’ neologism, ‘musturbation’, refers to clients’ list of self-defeating imperatives (‘musts’) that function as nothing more than ‘mental masturbation’.

requested in what was denied, showing in a few words an immeasurable depth of thought” (TLM, 2.232). Here Gregory’s notion of transformation, particularly his concept of knowledge, is more multi-dimensional than that of REBT. Perhaps at this point, object relations therapy, with its emphasis on mirroring and the internalization of the mother, provides a better analogy.

4. Concluding Remarks

This paper represents an initial foray into developing a description of spiritual formation that appeals to Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant religious educators working within the evolving paradigm of practical theology. I have suggested that Patristic theologians, specifically Gregory of Nyssa, provide a common theological starting point for answering the questions, “What is spiritual formation? What is its relationship to religious education and the human sciences?” In the first section of the paper, I demonstrated how Gregory’s transformational hermeneutic and pedagogical method serve the transformation his audience. In the second section, I ‘teased out’ his theological psychology and the basic contour of spiritual formation embedded in his scriptural exegesis. In the third section, I created a critical dialogue between this Cappadocian spirituality and Albert Ellis’ theory of personality and psychological transformation. This dialogue needs to be expanded by adding another contemporary voice, i.e., Object Relations Theory. Then my inter-disciplinary analysis might be utilized in developing a normative vision of spiritual formation that is grounded in both the Christian theological tradition and contemporary psychology.

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