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Gregory of Nyssa's (Relational) Doctrine of Grace as an Ontology of History in Ecumenical Perspective

ABSTRACT

The paper shows the relevance of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian ontology for Ecumenism. In fact, the Cappadocian's rereading of the relationship between ontology and history makes it possible to combine dynamics and being in his reading of divinization as *epektasis*. This seems to be relevant from the perspective of Luther studies, as it shows that Tuomo Mannermaa's interpretation of the Reformer's thought could be interpreted as relational and not merely dialectical. In the end, it seems that the research on a true theological ontology and the deepening of the theology of history can be useful for a better understanding of Luther's intention and inspiration in his doctrine on grace.

KEYWORDS

Gregory of Nyssa, Luther Studies, Tuomo Mannermaa, Theology of History, Ecumenism

I. INTRODUCTION: THE CHARISMA OF TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGY

The 20th century was marked by an extraordinary charismatic flourishing in the Catholic Church. This triggered a wide and deep theological development that is now pointing to Trinitarian ontology from very different perspectives. The core element of this process is the awareness of the relation between charisma and communion. In fact, every charisma is given to someone in a particular historical situation characterized by ecclesiastical and spiritual elements.

This means that the effort to be faithful to a charismatic effusion should also take into account what in the original gift is essential and what was only determined by the historical circumstances and the necessity to react against a distortion of the Gospel or to compensate for a lack in Christian life. This is connected also to the necessity of a diachronic approach that accompanies every enduring phenomenon. Its very success, in fact, implies a rich *Wirkungsgeschichte* that should be studied and analysed to be preserve communion and the life itself originated by the charismatic gift.

What is happening now is that from within different realities in the Catholic Church born out of those charismatic effusions in the last century a theological thought is emerging that aims at a relational reshaping of ontology. The point is that behind the particular elements which characterized the initial moment of the charismatic effusions a real new way of looking at reality as a whole should appear.

This observation suggests that Tuomo Mannermaa's interpretation of Luther can be read, from the suggested perspective, as a real effort to be faithful to the Reformer's inspiration. The Finnish criticism of Hermann Lotze's Kantian presuppositions and his nominalistic understanding of grace and justification brought to an explicit rereading of ontology from a real Trinitarian perspective. This happened in dialogue with the Orthodox Church, particularly with reference to the meaning of *theosis*. The concept is a key one, as the role of grace in Western theology is played by deification in the Eastern approach. It can be shown that the theological work of the Greek Fathers of the Church was accompanied and consisted of a real reshaping of ontology in the light of Christian Revelation. The core of this development was the role and concept of relation, which was necessary considered an accident in classical metaphysics, but could not be such according

to the Gospel because the very names of the divine Persons brought with themselves a ineludible reference to relation. What happened in history lifted the veil on a new view on the immanent dimension of the First Principle Himself. Being and history appeared together in a unprecedented synthesis that revolves around relation.

The Finnish approach to Luther seems to perfectly fit in this picture. Few words by Mannermaa could be sufficient: “[T]he concrete reality of the historical Jesus and the whole narrative of God’s history with mankind (*Heilsgeschichte*) are the foundation on which a theological ontology as Trinitarian ontology must be conceptualized.”¹ Risto Saarinen’s description of the ontological role of relation, related to Augustine’s influence on Luther, confirms the reading.²

Recent studies have shown how Gregory of Nyssa developed a real Trinitarian ontology through his reinterpretation of the role of relation, both as *schesis* and as *pros ti*, according to the Greek classical philosophical expressions.³ He resemantized them in order to introduce relation itself into the divine substance, enabling in this way a rereading of God’s action in favour of the human being as an expression of His being.⁴ This line of reasoning with guide us in the following theological and ontological exploration.

1 T. Mannermaa, *Doctrine of Justification and Trinitarian Ontology*, in: *Trinity, Time, and Church. A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson*, ed. C. Gunton, Grand Rapids 2000, p. 140.

2 Cfr. R. Saarinen, *Martin Luther and Relational Thinking*, in: *Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. P. Hinlicky, Oxford 2017, pp. 250–263.

3 Cfr. G. Maspero, *Patristic Trinitarian Ontology*, in: *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions And Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, eds. R.J. Wozniak, G. Maspero, London–New York 2012, pp. 211–229 and G. Maspero, *Essere e relazione. L'ontologia trinitaria di Gregorio di Nissa*, Roma 2013. To appear in English as *Being and Relation. Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Ontology*.

4 As it would be highlighted in the final section, this operation does not perfectly overlap with Augustine’s one, as he only juxtaposed relation and substance. Cfr. G. Maspero, *Relazione e ontologia in Gregorio di Nissa e Agostino*, “*Scripta Theologica*” 47 (2015), pp. 607–641.

2. MIND THE GAP: RELATIONAL GRACE

Christian ontological vision and classical metaphysics present some radical differences. The latter is characterized by an eternal ontological level, which embraced both God and the world. The difference between them is expressed in terms of descending grades of ontological perfection, degrading from the first principle. According to Christian Revelation, on the other hand, there exist two different and sharply distinct ontological orders. The first is eternal and coincides with divine nature, i.e. the Trinity, the second is created and came into being by God's will. But this implies that from the Christian perspective of the Greek Fathers the first Principle can only be partially known and only through Revelation, while creation coincides with the scope explored in prior philosophical research.

It is natural that the conception of deification substantially changes in the transition between these two ontological visions. In fact, the philosophical approach essentially consists in moving up the ladder of being, travelling with intellect along the different ontological steps which stand between man and God, like a *meson*, a mediator of intermediate metaphysical density. Instead, in the Christian context between God and the world there is nothing, i.e. an infinite gap. This makes deification, in the metaphysical sense, impossible because there is no access to the divine *from below*. On the contrary, it becomes accessible only through the gift of grace. It comes from the absolute Other, who is so transcendent as to be able to lower Himself, because He has no need of statically defending His position. So He makes Himself man, dynamically combining eternity and time in a relationship whose ontological strength is infinite since it is founded in the personal depth of God Himself. Salvation can be read as revelation and expression of the immanent relational dimension of God.

This difference was perceived and theologically elaborated in the fourth century, when the Trinitarian developments dealt with the formidable issue of identifying a principle of personal distinction that was not substance, but could be found *within* substance itself. Each of the three divine Persons, in fact, is the very one substance, being at the same time relationally distinct from the other two. From the beginning the discussion was focused on the *relation*, toward which the very names of the divine Persons pointed. It belonged to the relational realities, indicated by Aristotle as the realities that are *pros ti*, that is, revealed

through something, and then connected in the tradition of the commentators of Aristotle's *Categories* as *schesis*. This term depends on the Greek *echein*, the verb *to have*, and indicates *disposition*, understood as an external addition. This is considered the minimum of the accidents, because it not only needs a substance in which to subsist, but even two.⁵

From the theological standpoint the philosophical discussion became extremely relevant, especially in the fourth century when Arius, in his criticism of those who affirmed the divinity of the Son, explicitly denied that the *logos* could pertain to relations,⁶ followed in this by Eusebius.⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, on the other hand, can state clearly the opposite,⁸ because his theology also contains a reformulation of ontology as an extension of classical metaphysics precisely in the sense of recognizing an immanent dimension to the divine substance in which the eternal relationships of the three divine Persons are found.

The fundamental element from the ontological point of view is that between God and the world there is a true infinite gap.⁹ The distinction between them is not based on the existence of different substances which occupy an intermediate position within the same ontology. But now we have two different ontologies connected only by relations. Gregory, following in the footsteps of Athanasius and Basil, developed this doctrine to answer Eunomius, who spoke of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity as three different substances.¹⁰ He did not use the proper names of the Persons, rather made an appeal to philosophical terminology. The Bishop of Nyssa explained:

But I think the reason for this new invention of names is obvious to everybody: all men when they hear the titles "father" and "son"

5 Cfr. A. Conti, *La teoria della relazione nei commentatori neoplatonici delle Categorie di Aristotele*, "Rivista Critica di Storia della Filosofia" 38 (1983), pp. 275–276.

6 Arius, *Letter to Alexander Bishop of Alexandria*, in: Athanasius, *De synodis*, 16, 4, in: *Athanasius Werke*, II/7, ed. H.-G. Opitz, Berlin 2011, p. 244, II.

7 See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical Theology*, 2, 14, 2, 1–3, 1, in: *Eusebius Werke*, 4, Hrsg. G.C. Hansen, E. Klostermann, Berlin 1972, pp. 61–182.

8 Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio Catechetica Magna*, Hrsg. E. Mühlenberg, Leiden 1996 (Gregorii Nysseni Opera [= GNO] III/4), II, 1–4.

9 A very interesting and balanced study on this subject is X. Batllo, *Ontologie scalaire et polémique trinitaire*, Münster 2013.

10 Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 151, 1–154, 13 (GNO I, 71, 28–73, 15).

immediately recognize from the very names their intimate and natural relation to each other (φυσικὴν πρὸς ἄλληλα σχέσιν). Community of nature (τὸ γὰρ τῆς φύσεως συγγενὲς) is inevitably suggested by these titles.¹¹

In this text the community of nature and the reciprocal relation are linked together both for the divine dimension and for the created one. The very names of the divine Persons speak of such a relation that implies identity of nature between those who are linked by it. In this way, the relations *in divinis* cease to be considered mere accidents: thus is opened the possibility to reread the relation as perfection on the creatural level as well.¹²

This novelty with respect to the philosophical heritage can be clearly seen in *On the Soul and Resurrection*, that has been explicitly conceived by Gregory of Nyssa on the model of the Socratic dialogues, so to be known as a “Christian Phaedo.”¹³

The role of Socrates is attached to Macrina, to whom Gregory questions how it is possible that the aspiration toward the good remains in men and women who lead a life according to virtue (κατ’ ἀρετὴν βίον). A life according to virtue is actually attracted to the Good of desire (δι’ ἐπιθυμίαν) with which God pulls it to Himself as a kind of rope (τινα σείράν).¹⁴ Once every irrational desire has faded, how is it possible that the aspiration to what is better remains?

The response of Macrina resumes the Platonic-Aristotelian teaching on the human rational faculty: in fact, the faculty “of contemplating and of discerning” (τὸ θεωρητικὸν τε καὶ διακριτικὸν) is precisely of that part of the soul which is similar to God (θεοειδοῦς) because

11 Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 159, 1–160, 1 (GNO I, 75, 1–5).

12 See G. Maspero, *Essere e relazione*, op. cit.

13 See C. Apostolopoulos, *Phaedo Christianus: Studien zur Verbindung und Abwägung zwischen dem platonischen Phaidon und dem Dialog Gregors von Nyssa Über die Seele*, Frankfurt a. M.–Bern 1986; H.M. Meissner, *Rhetorik und Theologie: Der Dialog Gregors von Nyssa De anima et resurrectione*, Frankfurt a. M. 1991; M. Pellegrino, *Il platonismo di S. Gregorio Niseno nel dialogo “Intorno all’anima e alla risurrezione”*, “Rivista di Filosofia Neo-scolastica” 30 (1938), pp. 437–474.

14 Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione*, in: *S. P. N. Gregorii Episcopi Nysseni Opera quae reperiri potuerunt omnia*, tomus tertius, ed. J.-P. Migne, Parisiis 1863, col. 89A (Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Graeca [= PG] 46).

in these activities we grasp the divine (τὸ Θεῖον). Once purified either in the present life or after death, nothing will be able to prevent the soul from contemplating the Good, which by its very nature attracts (έλκτικόν πως κατὰ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ φύσιν) each being that turns its face to It. The Good is identified, in fact, by nature with divinity itself (τὸ Θεῖον) and the purified soul is found in union (συνάφειαν) with what is the most proper and familiar to it.¹⁵ In this way there would no longer be need for the movement of desire (τῆς κατ' ἐπιθυμίαν κινήσεως). Thus passion will no longer be necessary because there will be the fruition in what the soul truly knows, contemplating in its own beauty the archetype as in a mirror and in an image (ἐν κατόπτρῳ καὶ εἰκόνι).¹⁶ And the reason is that:

the true assimilation (ὁμοίωσιν) to God consists in the fact that our life reaches imitation to the transcendent substance in a certain way.¹⁷

In fact the life of God is not subjected to movement like that of men, whose desires are connected to the Good that is lacking. The divine nature, instead, does not lack anything and is identified with the Good itself.¹⁸ The reference to Platonism is evident both in the articulation of the question and in the vocabulary.

However, it is precisely here that the ontological novelty enters into that was elaborated in the context of the Trinitarian reflection specific to that time period.¹⁹ Gregory says, in fact, that the soul

conformed to the properties of the divine nature, imitates the superior life (τὴν ὑπερέχουσαν ζωὴν), in such a way that nothing remains

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 89B).

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 89C).

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 89C).

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 92C–93A).

¹⁹ The *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* has a clear *terminus post quem* in the death of Macrina, completed in July of 379: the datings in the reading range from the end of 380 to 386. By that time Gregory of Nyssa had already developed the essential elements of his ontological redevelopment of the *schesis* in the response to Eunomius contained in the *Contra Eunomium* I and II, composed during 380. See, P. Maraval, *Cronologia delle opere*, in: *Gregorio di Nissa. Dizionario*, edd. L. F. Mateo Seco, G. Maspero, Roma 2007, pp. 181–182.

but the disposition of love (τῆς ἀγαπητικῆς διαθέσεως), which naturally tends toward the Good. In fact, love is this: the interior relation (ἐνδιάθετος σχέσις) toward that which is desired in the heart (τὸ καταθύμιον).²⁰

Essential is the consideration that evil is not a something, but rather mere non-being, in such a way that, once united to the Good, the soul lacks nothing and is at the peak of beatitude. Juxtaposing this ontological consideration with the Pauline doctrine of the superiority of charity, whose act remains (ἡ κατὰ τὴν ἀγάπην ἐνέργεια μένει) even in eternity,²¹ Gregory states:

The life of the Supreme nature (τῆς ἄνω φύσεως) is love (ἀγάπη), because the Good is absolutely loveable for the one who knows it. And the Divinity knows itself, and the knowledge becomes love, insofar as what is known is the Good by nature.²²

The resolution of the tension between desire and divinity present in Greek metaphysical thought, intrinsically connected to the conception of desire itself as a potency, is based on the new conception of *schesis*, which is no longer considered a mere accident or intermediate grade distinct from the elements united to it—analogically to what happened with *logos*.²³

The Trinitarian reflection led to a rethinking of the ontology of the one and triune God, modifying the classical categories of relation and substance, in order to introduce the first into the second, subtracting it from the merely accidental. However, this allows us to think of the relation between God and man in terms of a relational participation, i.e. *schetical*, which does not have need of an intermediary ontological *meson*. Love, understood as an immanent relation, is thus interpreted as an essential element of the divine nature, and the latter is no longer reduced only to pure thought or the eidetic dimension, but is now a life of knowledge and love.

20 Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 96C)

21 Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 96C).

22 Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 96C).

23 On the resemantization of Logos in Gregory's Trinitarian Ontology, see G. Maspero, *Patristic Trinitarian Ontology*, op. cit.

Therefore, deification does not come about only by means of intellectual knowledge, but true knowledge is that which is had in love and which leads through this to union. Such expressions do not have a merely emotive significance, because Revelation allows us to reinterpret desire and will through authentically ontological lenses. Deification is realized not as a reduction or assimilation of the human to the divine, but as a mutual inhabitation that is able to maintain the distinction of nature thanks to the relation.

It is to be noted that Gregory of Nyssa is the first and practically the only one to make recourse to the expression *endiathetos schesis*.²⁴ The divine substance is characterized by an immanent dimension that is absolutely distinct from created nature, which in contrast to the Absolute, has the possibility of non-existence. This immanent dimension is made up of the Father, the Son (who is the *Logos*), and the Holy Spirit. The distinction between the Three is purely relational: for this reason the Persons are *within* the substance and do not constitute diverse substances, but they perfectly identify with the one infinite substance and divine nature, which cannot be confined or limited.

This ontological interpretation of love by means of the *endiathetos schesis* is present in a couple of other passages from Gregory's works.²⁵ Especially important is the one in homily II of his *In Canticum canticorum*,²⁶ as it clearly points at the altered participative structure. In fact, Gregory comments on Song 1:5-8, interpreting the words of the bride who says she has become black from not having been vigilant and having lost her purity (*καθαρότητας*), being clothed in leather garments (cf. Gen 3:21).²⁷ Now, however, thanks to the encounter with the divine Groom, Righteousness has come to love her anew (*ἀγαπήσασάν*)

24 The only other occurrence is from the sixth century: *Eliae (olim Davidis) in Aristotelis categorias commentarium*, in: *Eliae in Porphyrii Isagogen et Aristotelis categorias commentaria*, ed. A. Busse, Berolini 1900, 191,23 (Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca [=CAG] 18.1).

25 For *In Ecclesiasten homiliae* (GNO V, 417, 13-14) see the next section.

26 For a nice analysis of the recurrence of the *schesis* in the *In Canticum Canticorum* see: I. Vigorelli, *Desiderio e beatitudine: schesis nell'In Canticum canticorum di Gregorio di Nissa*, "Annales Theologici" 28 (2014), pp. 277-300.

27 Regarding this interpretation, see J. Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, Paris 1944, pp. 25-31; 55-60; J. Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nyssa*, Leiden 1970, pp. 154-185.

giving back to her her lost beauty.²⁸ And the text continues, explaining that:

Thus, ceasing to speak to the young women, the bride goes back to petitioning the groom, taking the name of the one who he had desired as an intimate relation (ἐνδιάθετον σχέσιν) to him.²⁹

The theme of the name is fundamental both in Judeo-Christian theology,³⁰ and in the theological perspective of the debate with Eunomius. In fact, while the latter affirmed that the term *unbegotten* indicated the divine substance, in such a way that the *begotten* Son could not be considered God precisely on account of being begotten and not unbegotten, the Cappadocian Fathers held God to be ineffable, in such a way that any name would be useful to speak of Him, but no name could express Him fully. God is knowable through His actions in our favour in the divine economy, that is, in the history of salvation. Thus the bride says:

“Tell me, you whom my heart loves,” (Song 1:7). In fact, I call you such, because your name is beyond every other name, and for every rational nature it is ineffable and incomprehensible. Therefore, the relation (σχέσις) of my soul with you is for you the name that gives knowledge of your goodness.³¹

Only love, being a relation, can be a name of God, making the Trinity, known, because the triune God is relational. Love is the reciprocal relation that unites the bride with the Groom who loved her when she was all black through sin. She wonders, in fact, how she could not love Him who loved her from the beginning, who loved her, offering His life for her, shedding His Blood.³²

The essential point is that love is here understood not only as a desire for beauty, according to the Platonic schema, but as a gift of oneself. In this consists the novelty. The participation in the Good is not

28 See Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 60, 16–22).

29 GNO VI, 61, 1–3.

30 See J. Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, op. cit., pp. 48–60.

31 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 61, 13–17).

32 See Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 61, 17–62, 3).

based on a necessary ontological structure that requires a rigid hierarchy in order to safeguard the distinction between God and the world. Rather, the participation is a gift from the source. The bride says this:

I, running toward you who are the source, will sip from the divine drink with which you quench the thirst of the thirsty, with water flowing from your side because the wound has opened this source. And whoever drinks of this becomes a source of water that will flow forth for life eternal (Jn 4:14).³³

This participation based on giving and loving, which will in turn give rise to gift and love, explains salvation as a real ontological change of the human being made possible by the presence of God in him or her. In fact, the bride says that she has become righteous and beautiful again insofar as Righteousness has loved her, receiving through the personal relation a real participation in the very life of God.

3. UNION WITHOUT CONFUSION: ΕΡΕΚΤΑΣΙΣ AND HISTORY

But this does not imply any confusion between the Creator and the creature. Gregory traces a parallelism between the two ontological levels, but he is perfectly aware of the differences between them: in God *schesis* perfectly communicates the infinite and eternal divine nature, so that each Person is numerically the same substance, whereas at the human level it only communicates a participation into the human nature.

This can also be seen, for example, in his Commentary on the Song of the Songs. Elias Moutsoulas has highlighted that commenting on this book Gregory, unlike Origen, is mainly concerned about the ontological relationship between God and the human person.³⁴ The Cappadocian stresses at the same time the absolute difference between the divine nature and the world, on one hand, and the freedom of the loving relationship with the human beings, on the other:

³³ Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 62, 3–7).

³⁴ Cfr. E. Moutsoulas, *Γρηγόριος Νύσσης, Βίος, Συγγράμματα, Διδασκαλία*, Athens 1997, p. 97.

You are truly beautiful – not only beautiful, but the very essence (οὐσία) of the Beautiful, existing forever as such, being at every moment what you are, neither blooming when the appropriate time comes, nor putting off your bloom at the right time, but stretching (συμπαρατείνων) your springtime splendor out to match the everlastingness of your life – you whose name is love of humankind (φιλανθρωπία).³⁵

In this text the languages of poetry and ontology meet: the very name of God is Love, that is a relation that does not fade away but is stronger than the passing of time. History and eternity are knotted together by the verb συμπαρατείνω, that derives from τείνω just as ἐπέκτασις.

The latter comes from Phil 3:13, where Paul says: “Brothers, I do not reckon myself as having taken hold of it; I can only say that forgetting all that lies behind me, and straining forward to what lies in front (ἔμπροσθεν ἐπεκτεινόμενος), I am racing towards the finishing-point to win the prize of God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus.”³⁶

Jean Daniélou defined *epektasis* as follows: “For the Platonist, on the other hand, change can only be deterioration; for the spiritual and the divine are identical, and the divine is unchangeable. But once we establish the transcendence of the divine with respect to the created spirit, another sort of change becomes possible, the movement of perpetual ascent. This movement tends towards the Immovable, and under this aspect it is at the opposite pole to the meaningless motion of the material world: it is process of unification and concentration. But the ultimate unity and stability are never achieved; the soul is conceived as a spiritual universe in eternal expansion towards the infinite Darkness.”³⁷

The different meanings of the two forms derived from τείνω – συμπαρατείνω and ἐπέκτασις – are determined by the couple of prepositions which precede it: in the first one, *sun* and *para* express the co-extensive dimension that characterizes God’s eternal ontology, in the latter, *epi* and *ek* express in the same time the simultaneous union (*epi*,

35 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 106, 20–107, 5); Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. R.A. Norris, Atlanta 2012, p. 119.

36 Phil 3:13–14.

37 J. Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical Writings*, Crestwood 1961, pp. 56–57.

Greek for “at” or “towards”) and excess (*ek*, Greek for “out of”) which mark the relationship between the creature and the Creator.³⁸

Epektasis and apophatism in Gregory's theological architecture are the hallmarks of the new ontological framework characterized by the gap between the higher uncreated nature and the lower created nature.

In fact, only the Incarnation of the eternal Logos could have made known the higher ontology, i.e. divine immanence, because only a free action of the Divinity could fill the infinite gap between the two natures. In this way, Christ is the *Logos* who becomes truly human without ceasing to be divine, in such a way that He is not *in between* the two ontologies, as the Arians thought, but that He perfectly belongs to both natures.

This means that only through Christ and His flesh we can get to know something about the Trinity whose splendor is excessive for our mind.³⁹ The apophatic dimension has in Gregory a deep Christological dimension not always sufficiently stressed: for example, commenting on Song 1:16, the Cappadocian interprets the shadow by the bed of the Bride and the Bridegroom as a reference to the economy of Incarnation, because only through the “shadow” of the human nature of Christ the pure rays of divine glory could reach the creatures without destroying them.⁴⁰ This line of interpretation is typical in Gregory's theological grammar: for example, he reads the theophany of the Burning Bush as a prophecy of the Incarnation of the *Logos* in the Virgin's Womb.⁴¹ The ontological gap implies that revelation always takes place through a veil.

This means that it is not possible to get to know God through a substantial connection, but the infinite gap can only be filled by relation. No name can express God's essence, but His relation (*σχέσις*) with the soul is a true name that makes known God as Love.⁴² This is the experience of the Bride in the Song, who discover within herself a path to get

38 Cfr. J. Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory*, op. cit., p. 59.

39 Cfr. G. Maspero, *L'ontologia trinitaria nei Padri Cappadoci: prospettiva cristologica*, in: *Trinità in relazione: Percorsi di ontologia trinitaria dai Padri della Chiesa all'Idealismo tedesco*, a cura di C. Moreschini, Panzano in Chianti 2015, pp. 69–91.

40 Cfr. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 107, 9–108, 4).

41 Cfr. Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio in diem natalem Christi* (GNO X/2, 246–247).

42 Cfr. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 61, 13–17).

in touch with the Higher nature, that ontologically *is* Love (ἀγάπη).⁴³ From this perspective it is possible to see the theological meaning of the following definition, that is the third and last text where *endiathetos schesis* appears in Gregory's works:

Love (φίλτρον) is the interior relation (ἡ ἐνδιάθετος σχέσις) to what is desired in the heart and is caused by pleasure or passion.⁴⁴

So it is exactly the ontological reshaping of relation that makes possible to conceive *epektasis* as a dynamical relationship of history and being, as for the soul in *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione*, who through love becomes similar to the divine nature, that is Love, being *pure disposition* of love, that is a pure immanent relation to God.

This very ontological understanding of relation seems to found the possibility of *epektasis*. One of Gregory's best descriptions of this infinite progress of the soul is his ontological interpretation of Moses' ascent:

[Moses] shone with glory. Although exalted (ἐπαρθεις) by such magnificence, he still burns with desire: he is insatiable to still have more and still has thirst for that which constantly filled him to his pleasure; and, as if he had not yet enjoyed it, he asks for more: he beseeches God that He appear to him as He is in Himself and not merely in the measure in which he, Moses, can participate in Him.⁴⁵

His desires grows in the measure that his relationship with God becomes stronger. It is fundamental that his participation is presented from the perspective of God's true being, and not from that of human potency. It seems that the new ontological dimension of relation changes creature itself:

It seems to me that Moses takes on these sentiments to create a disposition (διαθέσει) of soul that is enamoured of what is beautiful by nature.⁴⁶

43 Gregory of Nyssa, *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione* (PG 46, 96C).

44 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Ecclesiasten* (GNO V, 417, 13–14).

45 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis* II, 230,1–6 (GNO VII/1, 113–114).

46 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis*, II, 231,1–2 (GNO VII/1, 114).

The terminology used by Gregory is that of disposition and of the relatives, which are those realities adverbially described as turned towards something else. Aristotle uses *πρὸς τί πως ἔχειν* as definition of relation.⁴⁷ And Gregory defines human perfection in relational terms:

Perhaps the perfection of human nature consists precisely in the disposition (*τὸ οὕτως ἔχειν*) to always want to have more and more good.⁴⁸

So precisely the fact that deification is the participation in God Himself through the personal relation with His infinite self implies that the desire of the finite creature is always full and always needs to be filled, because the very response of God makes the human person more capable of receiving Him:

For this reason, the ardent lover of beauty (*ὁ σφοδρὸς ἐραστής τοῦ κάλλους*) welcomes within himself what sometimes appears to him to be only an image of what he desires, and he longs to be filled by the very figure of the archetype. This is the purpose of his audacious request, which goes beyond the limits of desire, that is, beyond the veils of beauty, no longer through mirrors and reflections, but face to face. The voice of God gives what is asked through the very refusal of it, showing in a few words an immeasurable abyss of thought. The generosity of God, in fact, agrees to satiate the desire of Moses, but does not promise to him rest or satiety.⁴⁹

From this perspective, apophatism is not a *no*, but on the contrary, is precisely the gift of the divine *yes* in the relation of mutual indwelling between finite creature and infinite Creator. Thus, to see God consists in never stopping to want to see Him, turning the gaze⁵⁰ always to Him (*πρὸς αὐτὸν*) so that, paradoxically, Moses is filled with what he desires precisely because his desire is never fully satisfied (*δι' ὧν ἀπλήρωτος ἢ ἐπιθυμία μένει*).⁵¹ This is *epektasis*: every ending is but a beginning,

47 Aristotle, *Categoriae*, 8a 31–32, in: *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation, One-Volume Digital Edition*, ed. J. Barnes, Princeton 2014.

48 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis* I, 10, 4–6 (GNO VII/1, 5).

49 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis* II, 231, 5–232, 8 (GNO VII/1, 114, 9–19).

50 Cfr. Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis* II, 233, 3–5 (GNO VII/1, 114, 21–23).

51 Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Mosis* II, 235, 6 (GNO VII/1, 115, 13–14).

a new starting point of the ascent, in an ever growing union, always perfect and always deeper. Commenting on Song 2:6, Gregory has recourse to the image of the arrow, that is shot towards the divine nature by the Archer, i.e. Christ, but at the same time travels towards the infinite and has already achieved its goal resting in His hands.⁵²

The desire becomes a constant disposition in the personal relation with God who dynamically unites the human person and God in an eternal movement. Apophatism is thus the translation of divine transcendence and of its overflow which draws in participation. For this reason, just like desire, movement also changes meaning in the ontological grammar of Gregory of Nyssa:

Therefore the reasoning shows that that which seems to be feared – I mean to say that our nature is mutable – is instead a wing for the flight towards the greatest things, since it would be a punishment for us to not be able to undertake a change for that which is better. Therefore let not he who sees in his nature the disposition to change become afflicted, but moving in every thing towards that which is better and transforming himself *from glory to glory*,⁵³ let him change thus, becoming every day constantly better, in daily growth, and perfecting himself always more, without ever being able to reach the limit of perfection. For in this consists true perfection: to never stop growing towards the best and to place no limits to perfection⁵⁴.

Perfection is no longer static in the achievement of a goal,⁵⁵ because when the goal is a relationship with the One who is infinite and eternal then it is already reached within the dynamic of an always growing union. The human person is, thus, recognized as a pilgrim not simply provisionally but definitively, insofar as his eternal perfection and glory remain an eternal movement not only *toward* God, but *in* God. In this way the pilgrimage *in via* itself is recognized as a grace and a beginning of glory.

52 Cfr. Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 129, 10–16).

53 2 Cor 3:18. See J. Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory*, op. cit., p. 69.

54 Gregory of Nyssa, *De Perfectione* (GNO VIII/1, 213, 20–214, 6).

55 See J. Daniélou, *La Colombe et la ténèbre dans la mystique byzantine ancienne*, “Eranos Jahrbuch” 23 (1954), pp. 400–405.

Jean Daniélou has expressed this in a very effective form: "This is essentially what Gregory is describing. Men always have the tendency to stabilize, to fix, the various stages of perfection which they have attained, and to see in the time-process a threat to their very transitory moments of happiness. They want to recover their past ecstasies, to go, like Marcel Proust, in search of Time Past. For Gregory, on the contrary, the future is always better than the past. But to overcome this natural tendency of the soul, Gregory offers the support of faith, which is an adherence to a promise. Here we have the transition from poetry to prophecy, from the anthropology of the Platonists to that of the Bible. Paradise – and creation – is yet to come. We must non longer try to recall it, but to hope for its accomplishment. And thus forgetfulness, a sin to the Platonist, here becomes a virtue. We must leave the known to go towards the unknown, to go out, as Rainer Maria Rilke would say, into the Open."⁵⁶ This is why both Andreas Spira⁵⁷ and Jean Daniélou⁵⁸ wrote on Gregory's conception of time stressing its ontological revolutionary meaning, because the perfection becomes dynamic, while for Greek thought it had to be finite by necessity.⁵⁹

If perfection is now recognized in dynamics, that means that a true revolution has changed ontology. In fact the metaphysical thought linked motion to the potential element bringing to a static picture of Divinity and, because of that, of being. Again with Jean Daniélou, we can see how deep the transformation was: "Now to overcome this difficulty Gregory had to destroy the equation: good = immutability, and evil = change. And consequently he had to show the possibility of a type of change which would not merely be a return to immobility – that is, to be a mere negation of change. Here then is the revolution in thought which Gregory accomplished."⁶⁰

The eternal beatitude of the human person is thus conceived in a dynamic sense, creating a sort of continuity between grace, the ascension

56 J. Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory*, op. cit., p. 61.

57 See A. Spira, *Le temps d'un homme selon Aristote et Grégoire de Nyssa*, in: *Colloques internationaux du CNRS*, Paris 1984, p. 289.

58 J. Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nisse*, Leiden 1970.

59 See E. Mühlberg, *Die Unendlichkeit Gottes bei Gregor von Nyssa. Gregors Kritik am Gottesbegriff der klassischen Metaphysik*, Göttingen 1966, pp. 29–58 and R. Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, Basel 1950, pp. 13–15.

60 J. Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory*, op. cit., pp. 47–48.

of the soul, mystical experience, and Heaven. Paul is an example of this, for he was initiated into Paradise and raptured to the third Heaven, as he reports it in 2 Cor 12:1–4. For him, according to Gregory, the good reached did not become a term of desire (ὄρον τῆς ἐπιθυμίας),⁶¹ but the beginning of a new upward surge:

In this way he [Paul] taught us, I believe, that, regarding the blessed nature of the Good, a great part is constituted by what we sometimes find ourselves; but infinitely greater than what is grasped each time is that which remains still beyond that, and this experience is continually repeated for those who participate of the Good, insofar as one enjoys continual growth, which is actuated in the entire eternity of the ages through always greater realities.⁶²

This means that Gregory's *epektasis* itself makes possible to speak of *theosis* in a true ontological way, preserving in a perfect way the ontological gap. This is the stronghold that defends the identification of grace with pure gift, without necessity of discarding its ontological content.

For this reason, the ideal axis that unites the divine infinity, apophatism, and *epektasis* can continue with the Sacraments as presence of Christ Himself:

He who has learned that Christ is the Head of the Church, consider first of all that every head is of the same nature (ὁμοφύης) and substance (ὁμοούσιος) with the body which is subject to it, and that there is a unique connaturality (συμφύια) of each part in relationship to the whole (πρὸς τὸ ὅλον), which thanks to a unique co-spiration (διὰ μιᾶς συμπνοίας) actuates the conformity of sensation (συνπάθειαν) of the parts together with the whole. Therefore, if something is external to the body, it is also totally external to the head. With this the reasoning teaches us that also each member must become that which the head is by nature, to be intimately united with the head (πρὸς τὴν κεφαλὴν οἰκειῶς ἔχει). And we are the members that complete the body of Christ⁶³.

61 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 245, 22).

62 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 245, 22–246, 5).

63 Gregory of Nyssa, *De perfectione* (GNO VIII/1, 197, 19–198, 4).

From this perspective the union of the human being with God is absolutely real and ontological. The new dynamical conception of eternity presents a continuity between history and heaven, so much so that it seems possible to speak of a true union of being and history.

4. CONCLUSION: AN ECUMENICAL ONTOLOGY OF HISTORY

From the ecumenical perspective, it is particular important to highlight that the core element of this ontology of history is not a theory, but the real presence of Christ in the life of the Christians. Such an union, in fact, is not just a matter of good deeds or of clever understanding, but takes place in the darkness of the night, like the spousal union in the nuptial bed, because God is beyond all possibility of understanding. Therefore the text of the *In Canticum*, in Gregory's reading, shows a bride who does not manage to reach the Groom but after the encounter continually seeks Him. Thus the union is apophatic precisely because it is relational. In fact, paradoxically, specifically in encountering the ontological excess of God, which renders impossible intellectual comprehension of Him, the possibility of real union with Him comes about in the personal dimension of faith. Gregory shows, commenting on the Song of Songs, that God is not in the mind of man, but abides in his heart. For this reason, he tells the bride:

After having recently abandoned them leaving behind all of creation and abandoning all that is known intellectually in creation, and abandoning each positive approach, in faith I found the beloved and I will never again leave him clinging onto him whom I found with the grip of faith until he is in my inmost part. Certainly the inmost part is the heart that now becomes capable of receiving the divine indwelling of God, once it returns to the condition in which it was formed by the one who conceived it. Certainly one would not err who thought that the *mother* is the first cause of our sustenance.⁶⁴

This means that God cannot be reduced to human knowledge, even if the presence of the Trinity in the soul is perfectly real, as well as the

64 Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum canticorum* (GNO VI, 183, 5–15).

ontological change of the baptised. It is interesting to note, in fact, how Gregory unites the exegetical perspective to the ontological perspective, reading the *mother* in whose house the bride accepts the groom (see Song 3:4) as the first cause of all things, that is, God Himself, whose nature is absolutely transcendent. But this first Principle is now recognized as the Holy Trinity, in whose light all creation and human life change their meaning, presenting the relational dimension as the deepest level of their ontology.

In sum, it seems that Gregory's Trinitarian Ontology enables to understand Mannermaa reading of Luther as a return to the Reformer's criticism of a quasi-arian idea of the church as a intermediate ontological level, a non-relational mediation, that tarnished the gratuitousness of Christian salvation. This shows at the same time both a theological and a historical attention, that seems fundamental for ecumenism.

Christian faith stands on the real presence of God in history given by and in Jesus Christ the Risen. This consists of a double element, both historical and ontological, that requires at the same time an ontology of history and a Trinitarian ontology as a foundation of it. Gregory of Nyssa's thought offers an example of this theological development, that could be tracked down, again at a historical level, to the origin of the variety of Luther's interpretations. A comparison of Augustine's and Gregory's Trinitarian ontology shows, in fact, that the approach of the former is more linguistic and less creative and powerful from the metaphysical perspective. On the contrary, the Cappadocian Father could have recourse to the rich tradition of the commentators of Aristotle's *Categories*, developing from them an original ontological view, where relation is not only a metaphysical co-principle with substance, as in the Latin Father, but is *within* the divine substance itself.

This founds at the same time (a) apophaticism with the cognitive value of will and love, (b) the identification of *theosis* with *epektasis* and (c) a new understanding of history in continuity with eschatology. Will and relation, in fact, have an ontological dimension, that makes possible the real change of the human person, without any confusion between God and the creature.

The path so sketched suggests that the study of Trinitarian ontology and the apophatic approach can be very effective in ecumenical studies, so to offer an accessible route to communion, in full respect of the history and differences of each Christian confessions.

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