

Gregory of Nyssa and Human Diversity: Image and Likeness

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One of the most curious things about Christianity is that, for a religion with a literal human body at its centre, it is perhaps the most bodyphobic of faiths, and the one in which an unreceptiveness to diversity of identity sits in the starkest contrast to core precepts of the theology. The African-American, gay essayist, activist, and playwright James Baldwin left the Christian church much both to challenge and to enrich its theology in this regard. The grammar of theology that infused Baldwin's life as a young preacher is woven through his later writing and it focuses on identity, religion and human nature. In his 1955 essay "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin recalls what it was like to be present at the funeral of his father, a man he knew deeply. He recalls a full but not packed Church, the fact that he had nothing black to wear, and just how strange it felt that the person who had quarrelled with his father most—his aunt—was the person, to his surprise, most visibly grief-stricken. His most powerful observation, however, is that in the sermon preached by the minister a picture was given of "a man whom none of us had ever seen": he was said to be "thoughtful, patient, and forbearing, a Christian inspiration to all who knew him, and a model for his children."¹ It eventually dawns upon James Baldwin that Christian liturgy, in its ancient and profound words, had endowed his

father's rather questionable life with coherence. That as he was eulogized, he was liturgically forgiven of all his lapses, greeds, errors, and straying from the truth, and that his life was, at its very end, in the light of Christ, looked upon not with judgement but with charity.

The foundation of theology is the revelation of God, which we witness in the Scriptures and come to know fully in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Theology cannot be disembodied—this is one of the great lessons of the incarnation. As the writers of the First Letter of John remind us:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1:1–3)

For the Christian community that John is writing to, there is a clear necessity to keep hold on to the sensory

¹ James Baldwin, *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998), 77.



Andrea Pisano, Creation of Adam. Marble panel from the campanile of Florence Cathedral, 1334–37.

² Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, selection in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, ed. Jean Daniélou, trans. Herbert Musurillo (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1995), 114.

³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2011), 98.

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *In Ecclesiasten Homiliae 4*, in *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Stuart George Hall (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1993), 72–75.

experience of Jesus Christ. The revelation of God in Christ was a revelation to the heart, mind, soul, and senses. The Son of God came not as theory or concept or text, but as a living, breathing person who, in the incarnation, makes intimacy with God not only possible, but part of how God is God.

A plethora of issues vex the Church today. In the West, at least in Anglicanism, we are obsessed with numerical decline, human sexuality, and the continued work to eradicate institutional racism. Our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers wrestle with the fallout from liturgical reforms and perceptions of the papacy, as well as overdue conversations around the ministry of women in the diaconate. In the East, the continued threat of persecution for Coptic Christians as well as Ethiopian and Eritrean Tewahedo Christians is a very real evil, as is the sadness of schism emboldened and made visible now by the war against Ukraine and the complicity of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy. Behind all of these “issues” (itself a very cerebral and disembodied word) is of course the often unspoken “problem”

of identity, and the involvement of actual bodies.

In response to our very real human differences, and as a result of fear, borders are erected. Theological borders, national borders, cultural borders: the distinctions we place between ourselves and the “other” do not serve our vocation to grow into the stature of Christ. We may feel as though we do not have sufficient tools in our theological toolbox for dealing with such unprecedented moments in our shared life, but this is where attention to one another as those who live in flesh *and* soul—who are made in the εικῶν and ὁμοίωμα, the image and likeness of God—is most vital.

Gregory of Nyssa says that this gift of being made in the image of God, which is not separated nor far from our nature, “dwells within every one of us, ignored and forgotten.”² It is our work to seek out this image and likeness not just in ourselves, but in one another. It is helpful that eternity is the lens through which Gregory views the human being. Influenced by Origen, Gregory seeks to perceive the world as complete and integrated, human beings included. The hand of the divine is seen as being at work not just in the soul, but in the anatomy itself. God has created the entire cosmos, leaving, as Athanasius says, nothing barren of his divinity.³ Early Christian anthropology holds out serious consequences for what kind of shape our life together as the diverse people of God must take. Hence, for example, Gregory of Nyssa was the first person in history to offer a wholehearted rebuke of the institution of slavery, because, as he made clear, if those who owned other human beings believe the image of God was truly in all, then all slaves quite simply had to be set free.⁴ Once our relationship to God is correctly ordered, the landscape of

human-to-human relationships must first attend to and, in the end, transcend the divisions of social, sexual, gender, and racial difference.

The most pressing question of our time is undoubtedly: "What does it mean to be human?" In almost all patristic writings, this question comes to the forefront of what early Christian women and men were trying to understand. How does the "I" that I am relate to the "thou" that God is? The Christian answer to this dilemma is that our "I" relates to God's "thou" in and through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. There is no orthodox Christian anthropological understanding that can evade the physical body of Jesus Christ in relation to our own bodies and senses, nor the work of the Spirit in enabling us to pay attention to one another.

In 1947, another time when the world's core was shaken, the philosopher Simone Weil remarked: "Absolutely unmixing attention is prayer."⁵ To attend to the body, both our own as well as God's Body, is crucial work in a world increasingly torn apart over "identity." As a priest who is both Black and gay, I would urge that we attend to bodies and the identities we carry, and by attending to our difference to make sense of the Body of God. There is a consensus amongst our elders in the faith about the intimate relation between our human being and the being of God. For Gregory of Nyssa as for Irenaeus and indeed Gregory Palamas, it is not solely the soul of the human which shares in the divine image, but the body also which has been made in the image of God. The implications of a Christian anthropology that takes this as its starting point are too significant to be overlooked in the issues the Church faces in the world today.

If being made in the image and likeness of God gestures to our participation as human beings in the divine,

with all our different body marks, it speaks of a profound communion with the God whose motivation for creating us was a Triune excess of love. This is something unequivocally proclaimed by Gregory of Nyssa: we are created by goodness, for goodness, through goodness.⁶ As David Bentley Hart notes, "for Gregory, the only site of the beautiful or the true is in the entirety of creation's living body."⁷ It is because we are created in the image of God that each of us has the liberty to be seen as we truly are, as persons. It is no surprise, then, that Gregory of Nyssa is often referred to as the Cappadocian for the twentieth century. He provokes us to attend to the primary image of God, in which we are all created and which transcends social division. More importantly, he invites us to the place where all our certainties are challenged in the light of prayer, as Father Andrew Louth reminds us:

Contemplation is no longer the goal of the spiritual life: rather, a never-ending pursuit into deepening darkness, and a sense of the presence of God which is the result of God's drawing near to the creature, the archetype of which is the incarnation.⁸

The idea that we must understand others' identities before we can embrace the image of God in them is un-theological. Others, whatever their gender, sexuality, race, or class, are worthy of our love because they stand before us as those in whom God's likeness resides. The Church, therefore, the place where the water of baptism is thicker than blood or any human difference, must be the place where our inner treasure is outwardly realised, valued, and celebrated, as Gregory's words on Genesis make plain:

For "God," it says, "taking the dust from the earth, formed humankind"

⁵ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, (New York: Routledge Classics, 116).

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Discourse: A Handbook for Catechists*, trans. Ignatius Green (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2019), 5.4.

⁷ David Bentley Hart, "The 'Whole Humanity': Gregory of Nyssa's Critique of Slavery in Light of His Eschatology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54.1 (February 2001): 64.

⁸ Andrew Louth, *The Cappadocians*, 301 in: *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 300.

and by his own inbreathing he implanted life in what he formed, so that the earthly might be raised up to the divine and one certain grace of equal honour might pervade all of creation, the lower nature being mingled with the supercosmic.⁹

To suggest that the character of God's image or that the divine energies exist in just one particular section of humanity is to suggest a falsehood. One need only study the history of the enslavement of Africans or the horrors of World War Two to see where that premise leads. It is precisely on this falsehood that patriarchy, racism, and homophobia stand. Both grace and the image of God are extended throughout the whole race of humankind and therefore no single human, no one section of the human race, can make real the full depths of our shared vocation to reflect the image of God in the world. When we confuse person and nature, human freedom always goes awry. And thus, as a result of our own clinging to power and a false sense of independence from one another, we diminish the image in ourselves and in the other, as Vladimir Lossky notes so clearly: "The person of another will appear as the image of God to him who can detach himself from his individual limitations, in order to rediscover the nature common to all, and to realize by so doing his own person."¹⁰

An image of a beautiful equality is described in Acts 2:17, a quotation of Joel

2:28. Here we find the image of a God who unequivocally declares that he shall pour out his spirit upon all flesh without regard to age, race, or gender. It is in this outpouring of the Spirit upon the entire human race that new visions and new dreams arise for the world, for *this* world—as the Church ventures beyond the safety of its confines into the future where God lives amongst the diverse world he created. The incarnation, of course, is what takes us to this place where we can see and be seen, hold and be held, where we can attend to and live out the fullest depths of what it means to be *truly* human, because God in Christ has transgressed the boundary between earth and heaven, between you and me, and in dwelling among us has shown us what it means to live, to love, to die, and to set free. It is easy to negate the body as we plumb the depths of our vocation as the baptized, but Christ's body—his wounds and his risen life—are pedagogical tools in a moment when particular bodies are despised, rejected, and cast out, as though the εἰκών and ὁμοίωμα, the image and likeness in them, did not also bear witness to such hatred.

In the end of times, our ability to hold on to one another despite our differences will be the lasting artifact of our human love and the final witness to our human dignity writ large in the diverse and different Body of Christ, the Church at the center of which cruciform love and justice reigns. ✱

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Discourse*, 6.5.

¹⁰ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1991), 122.



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