Gregory of Nyssa is sometimes called the first Christian mystic and his mysticism is said to derive largely from Plotinus. This would imply that mysticism has been an odd Greek influence in the Christian setting from the beginning.\(^1\) Gregory read Plotinus, he was a thinker and able to reproduce or produce himself philosophical trains of thought. Gregory was the thinker, Basilius was the prince of the Church and Gregory of Nazianzus the pioneer of Christian eloquence.

This Hellenistic side to the man greatly appealed to Werner Jaeger. The founder of the “third humanism”, rather anti-Christian in his German period, towards the end of his life strove for a humanism inspired by Christianity, and a reconciliation between the Bible and Greek philosophy. He found the synthesis in Gregory of Nyssa, whom he regarded as a forerunner of Pelagius and Erasmus, his personal saints. And that is why we now have a fine edition of Gregory’s works, with Jaeger as its devoted editor.\(^2\)

The years following the Second World War saw a reaction to the interpretatio Graeca. This was mainly due to the studies of W. Völker and J. Daniélou, who saw Gregory primarily as a Christian.\(^3\) Such an approach has its advantages. There are a few themes which are best explained in a Biblical light. There is the experience of the dark cloud, orientated on the description of Moses on Mount Sinai. There is also the thought of the mystical life as a continuous and endless progress, based on the words of Paul, that he didn’t think he had already grasped it. And then there is the emphasis on love, which is inebriating and takes us out of ourselves. Here the Song of Songs and the Gospel of John are clearly sources of inspiration. Gregory was indeed a Christian and a (Origenist) theologian.


This struggle between classicists and theologians may of course continue for centuries, and has been waged in other areas for centuries. It is time for a different sound. We can let it be heard if we can visualise the historical situation.

There was great division in the Church in the days of the Cappadocians. The situation was extraordinarily unpleasant and confused. It is fair to say that Rome and Alexandria were pitted against the Eastern Church (especially the churches of Asia Minor and Syria). Julian the Apostate (361–363) had sought to introduce a humanistic state church, which led to the awareness that an adjustment was needed between Christendom and its cultural environment. The Cappadocians achieved the unity of the Church and the reconciliation with the cultural environment. The consequences were: the recognition of the Godhead of the Holy Ghost at the Council of Constantinople in 381; the introduction of the Creed, still erroneously known as the Nicene Creed, and which in contrast to the Apostolicum may be regarded as the only true symbol of all Christian churches. Basil of Caesarea organised monasticism in Asia Minor according to a rule which until the present day prevails for all orthodox monasteries (Orthodoxy has no monastic orders). Thus the Cappadocians present themselves to our mind’s eye as honourable men, philosophically trained, striving for ecclesiastical unity and in dialogue with the world.

But every man has his dark side. This is also true for a Church Father and a doctor ecclesiae. In the case of Basil we don’t have to search far and wide. It was his friend Eustathius, not he, who was responsible for the rise of monasticism in Asia Minor. This phenomenon was ushered in with wild excesses, as is usually the case when something new happens. Women were dressed in men’s outfits, the state of matrimony was dissolved, ownership abolished, slaves were manumitted. The Church thought it was all awful and decided to put a stop to it (Gangrae ca. 343). But Basil owed his impetus to that movement and to his friend Eustathius. Later he quarreled with Eustathius over church politics, and took all credit himself.

Gregory of Nyssa, too, had his dark side. He was in touch with heretics and also drew on them. These heretics were Messalians, or Euchites, those who pray. They were repeatedly condemned, first at the Synod of Side (ca. 390), later at the ecumenical Council of Ephesus in

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