Gregory of Nyssa on Spiritual Ascent and Trinitarian Orthodoxy: a Reconsideration of the Relation between Doctrine and Askesis

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1 Introduction. The Relation of Apologetic and Exegetical Texts in the Trinitarian Thought of Gregory of Nyssa: Aporia or Climax?

In an edited volume on Gregory of Nyssa’s theology, published in 2003, I ended my short introduction with the following remark: “What if a new pedagogy of Gregory’s trinitarianism should start with the rich insights into incorporation into the life of the Trinity brought about by mature ‘faith’ [...] \(\piστις\)? How then would we turn back to read the import of the earlier, more obviously polemical, discussions [sc. of the Trinity]? The emphases and expectations [...] would be significantly different from those of the old textbook account [...]”.

I went on to urge in closing a new “integration” of what modernity had—as I put it—“balefully dubbed Gregory’s ‘spirituality’, on the one hand, [over against] his ‘theology’ and ‘philosophy’, on the other”.

My purpose in this essay, then, is to make good on that promissory note in Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa and to attempt a further clarification and assessment of the novel emphases of trinitarian thinking to be found in Nyssen’s last great work, the commentary on the Song.

2 I had in mind there, of course, the enormously significant and influential wartime monograph on Nyssen by J. Daniélou, Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse, Paris 1944, 1953, with its analysis of Gregory’s so-called “doctrine spirituelle”, its account of his theory of “mystical experience”. While Daniélou brought the late commentary works of Gregory into the public eye to enormous new effect, it might be said that he had subtly re-directed Gregory’s intentions to his own purposes (his particular interests in “spirituality” and the so-called “natural desire for God” beloved of the emerging leaders of la nouvelle théologie), and thus according to the intellectual and philosophical fashions of his era. On this significant point of context, see my article “Gregory of Nyssa”, in: P. L. Gavrilyuk—S. Coakley (eds.), The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity, Cambridge 2012, 36–55.
3 H. Langerbeck (ed.), Gregorii Nysseni Opera: VI. In Canticum Canticorum (hereafter GNO VI), Leiden 1960. In what follows I also utilize the parallel Greek text and English translation in
since the appearance of the little Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa book, and especially in the profusion of excellent papers gathered in this volume, some of this integrative work has already been done, and with great panache.\(^4\) If what I argue here already sounds somewhat familiar, then, it will simply be because this paradigm shift in interpretation has, happily—at least in some circles—already become a reality. But perhaps nonetheless I may still add something to its force by a certain retrospective clarification, even systematization, of the effects of that shift for a full account of Gregory’s trinitarianism, since the matter clearly still remains contentious in the context of Dogmengeschichte.\(^5\) Yet I make that claim of systematization, of course, with a due sense of irony: Gregory himself is no “systematic” thinker whatever (especially not in the modern sense), but simply discourses freely in the genre appropriate to a particular context. Thus there are certain dangers—not least of anachronistic imposition—in attempting to “tidy up” after him in the way I propose. Nonetheless, I shall argue there is something important to be gained by focussing schematically on the distinctive new dimensions of trinitarian thinking which emerge only in the Song commentary, and the methodological significance of these shifts for any nuanced contemporary teaching about the doctrine of the Trinity in Gregory.

The main problem that confronts us in the Song commentary, of course, is the seemingly random, erratic, and exotic imprecision of trinitarian imagery which permeates the text, qua commentary, in contrast with the earlier apologetic treatises on the Trinity waged against late Arianism and purportedly primarily devoted to philosophical rigour and clarity—precisely for the purposes of warding off doctrinal error.\(^6\) A modern Lacanian might say that Gregory

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\(^5\) See especially the contribution of Volker Drecoll in this volume, whose perspective differs markedly from my own; and for further discussion, infra, below.

\(^6\) The key philosophical/apologetic texts have been closely studied in recent “Proceedings” of International Colloquia on Gregory of Nyssa: see L. Karfíková—S. Douglass—J. Zachuber (eds.), Contra Eunomium II, Leiden 2007; V.H. Drecoll—M. Berghaus (eds.), Gregory of Nyssa: The Minor Treatises on Trinitarian Theology and Apollinarianism, Leiden 2011; and J. Leemans—