

WHY WAS ST GREGORY OF NYSSA NEVER CONDEMNED FOR HIS DOCTRINE OF APOKATASTASIS?*

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ABSTRACT. This article will first point out that St Gregory of Nyssa supported the doctrine of apokatastasis or universal restoration as grounded in Christ and in defence of Christian “orthodoxy” against Arian tendencies—as Origen, his great inspirer, had done against “Gnosticism”. In light of this, the reason why Gregory’s doctrine of apokatastasis was never condemned by the Church (differently from the case of Origen) will be asked, and several potential answers, which reinforce one another, will be offered. Finally, the essay will highlight the role of Gregory as a touchstone of orthodoxy.

Keywords: St Gregory of Nyssa, Origen, St Maximus the Confessor, Patriarch Germanus I of Constantinople, Apokatastasis, Christocentrism, Orthodoxy, Purgatory, St Basil, St Naucratius, St Theosebia

Apokatastasis in Defence of Christian Orthodoxy in Origen’s and Gregory of Nyssa’s Christology

Both Origen and St Gregory of Nyssa—one of his most insightful followers—supported the doctrine of apokatastasis or universal restoration, within a context in which Christian soteriology, based primarily on Scripture, espoused Christian

* This project has benefitted from an Initiative of Excellence (KUL, related to the Professorship of Patristics and Church History I was awarded). For the works by Gregory of Nyssa, I used the Brill GNO series, *Gregory Nysseni Opera*, ed. Werner Jaeger et alii; for *De anima et resurrectione* and the scholia and glosses to it, I used the edition and commentary by I.L.E. Ramelli, *Gregorio di Nissa Sull’Anima e la Resurrezione*, Milan 2007. For Photius: *Photii Bibliotheca*, ed. I. Bekker, Berlin 1824-1825, and *Bibliothèque*, R. Henry, Paris 1959–1977.

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Platonism.¹ This trend will still continue in the last Western Patristic Platonist, Eriugena (who knew Origen and Greek Patristic well, including Gregory and Ps. Dionysius), who, after the model of Origen, joined the doctrine of apokatastasis with the third Neoplatonic movement of ἐπιστροφή.² In both Origen and Gregory, apokatastasis is Christocentric and grounded in Scripture.

It is important to point out that, as has been convincingly argued, both Origen and Gregory supported the theory of apokatastasis as an anti-heretical doctrine, respectively against “Gnostic” determinism, praedestinastionism and dualism (in the case of Origen, especially in Book 3 of *De principiis*) and against “Arian” subordinationism (in the case of Gregory of Nyssa, especially in *In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius*: see below), and as a theory endowed with strong Christological foundations.³ Later, this line—namely, supporting apokatastasis within an anti-heretical agenda—was to be followed by St Augustine in his anti-Manichaean polemic.⁴ Thus, both Origen and St Gregory of Nyssa supported the theory of apokatastasis as an anti-heretical doctrine, respectively against “Gnosticism” and “Arianism”, and provided it with a strong Christological foundation.

Gregory, as mentioned, argued for the doctrine of apokatastasis against “Arian” and “neo-Arian” subordinationism. In his *In Illud: Tunc et Ipse Filius*, his commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:28, Gregory’s anti-subordinationism in the Trinitarian area is connected to the argument for the eventual apokatastasis of all creatures, including even the devil (a totalising form of apokatastasis that is expressed in Gregory’s *Oratio Catechetica* as well). In this short exegetical work, Gregory addresses the issue of the eventual submission of the Son to the Father—as foretold by St Paul in 1Cor 15:28—and, deriving each argument from Origen, as I recently demonstrated extensively elsewhere,⁵ he claims that the Son’s eschatological submission cannot be interpreted as a sign of inferiority, as was contended by the “neo-Arians”, but it indicates the submission of all humanity—the “body of

¹ Argument in I.L.E. Ramelli, *Christian Soteriology and Christian Platonism: Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Biblical and Philosophical Basis of the Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, *Vigiliae Christianae* 61, 2007, 313-356.

² See the following footnote.

³ Argued thoroughly by I.L.E. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, *Vigiliae Christianae Supplements* 120, Leiden 2013; Origen’s Anti-Subordinationism and Its Heritage in the Nicene and Cappadocian Line, *Vigiliae Christianae* 65, 2011, 21-49; The Father in the Son, the Son in the Father in the Gospel of John: Sources and Reception of Dynamic Unity in Middle and Neoplatonism, “Pagan” and Christian, *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 7, 2020, 31-66.

⁴ As is demonstrated in I.L.E. Ramelli, *Origen in Augustine: A Paradoxical Reception*, *Numen* 60, 2013, 280-307.

⁵ Ramelli, *Anti-subordinationism*.

Christ”—to God in the end, so that God will be “all in all” (1Cor 15:28). Gregory thus bases his theory of apokatastasis in his defence of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine against “Arian” subordinationism (which was already contrasted by Origen himself ante litteram), just as Origen based it on his defence of “orthodox” Christian doctrine against “Gnostic” predestinationism.⁶ For both of these Patristic philosophers, the final apokatastasis will really be “the gift of God”, through Jesus Christ, and “the victory of God”.⁷

Now, if Origen and Gregory of Nyssa supported the theory of apokatastasis as a doctrine grounded in Scripture, and in defence of Christian “orthodoxy” (against “Gnosticism” and “Arianism” respectively), this contributes to explain the reason why Gregory’s doctrine of apokatastasis was never condemned by the Church (although Origen is assumed to have been condemned for both this doctrine and the so-called pre-existence of souls, which Justinian connected with the doctrine of metempsychosis—in fact, Origen probably never supported either the theory of transmigration of souls or their disembodied pre-existence⁸).

There are many factors, in addition to the general philosophico-theological reason outlined in the previous paragraph (and valid if we assume that theologians after Gregory grasped what I have noted, i.e. that he argued for his doctrine of apokatastasis in an anti-heretical, Christological context). I will endeavour to point out some of what I deem the most important reasons why his doctrine of apokatastasis was never condemned by the Church.

First Reason: Gregory’s Loci on Apokatastasis Later Understood as References to the Purgatory and Object of Glosses

One reason may easily reside in the interpretation of Gregory’s references to the doctrine of apokatastasis or final restoration as references to the purgatory (a later doctrine, with some grounds in ancient texts⁹). In fact, Origen, Gregory Nyssen

⁶ I use Origen’s own terminology: he does use the category of “heterodoxy” as opposed to “orthodoxy”.

⁷ I draw the former expression from Paul and Origen (χάρισμα τοῦ θεοῦ, θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον), and the latter, felicitous expression from H. Pietras, *L’escatologia della Chiesa*, Rome 2006, 104, who applies it to Gregory of Nyssa’s doctrine of apokatastasis: “the victory of God will be all-encompassing” (“la vittoria di Dio sarà totale”).

⁸ Argument in my Gregory of Nyssa’s Purported Criticism of Origen’s Purported Doctrine of the Preexistence of Souls, in: *Lovers of the Soul and Lovers of the Body: Philosophical and Religious Perspectives in Late Antiquity*, eds. S. S. Griffin and I.L.E. Ramelli, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022, 277-308.

⁹ Documentation in I.L.E. Ramelli, Origen, Bardaisan, and the Origin of Universal Salvation, *Harvard Theological Review* 102, 2009, 135-168.

and Gregory Nazianzen did not really distinguish hell from purgatory: in a way, they rather considered hell as what we call “purgatory”, deeming it temporary. Nevertheless, the so-called condemnation of apokatastasis in 543 and in the Council of Constantinople from 553—which is tampered with and at any rate does not mention Gregory of Nyssa as a supporter of this doctrine—led readers to some embarrassment at the presence of this doctrine in St Gregory, who, after the first Council of Constantinople (381), was regarded as a model of orthodoxy.

The embarrassment raised by Gregory’s theory of apokatastasis emerges, for example, from the glosses apposed to his *De anima et resurrectione* or *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, a dialogue that is modelled on Plato’s dialogue *Phaedo* (in reference to the immortality of the soul), but is Christianised (and therefore supports the resurrection and restoration), and contains important expressions of the theory of apokatastasis¹⁰—as many others of Gregory’s works do. In other works as well, for instance, textual variants omitting all references to the doctrine of apokatastasis testify to the embarrassment of later readers before St Gregory’s theory.

Here, I will offer some of the most significant examples from *De anima*,¹¹ from short glosses or variants to long scholia, beginning with a gloss—a marginal comment—to Gregory’s *An. et res.* 89CD. Gregory in his text says: “If, thanks to our solicitude in the present life, or thanks to the purification by fire in the next one, our soul will be able to liberate itself from irrational passions, then there will be nothing that can impede it to contemplate the Good”, which is God. Eternal contemplation of God, the supreme Good, is eternal blessedness. Now, the Byzantine scholiast, who read this passage and the whole dialogue by Gregory, was probably offended by this expression of the doctrine of apokatastasis, in the reference to otherworldly purification, which will enable sinners to finally contemplate God. Codex A in a marginal note, instead of κάθαρσις (“purification”) reports the variant reading πύρωσις (“being burnt by fire”). Clearly, the former reading, by Gregory himself, points to the purificatory function of punishments in the next world, supported before him by Bardaisan of Edessa, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen himself. The latter reading, instead, that of the variant, rules out the purifying aim of otherworldly suffering and insists on a merely retroactive punishment.

¹⁰ See I.L.E. Ramelli, Gregory of Nyssa on the Soul (and the Restoration): From Plato to Origen, in: Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives, eds. A. Marmodoro and N. McLynn, Oxford 2018, 110-141.

¹¹ In the commented edition of the dialogue by Ramelli, *Gregorio Sull’anima*, many of such very interesting and telling glosses are reported. Codex A corresponds to codex Uffenbachianus. For a complete *conspectus codicum*, see the introduction by Andreas Spira and Ekkehard Mühlberg to their edition of *De anima et resurrectione* in GNO 3.3, Leiden 2008.

Moreover, in *An. et res.* 92, probably in reference to Gregory's above-mentioned claims about the purification by fire in the next world, which will eventually allow sinners to contemplate God, cod. A reports a lengthy scholium, which I translate in the following block quotation. Gregory's words on the eternal contemplation of God are declared in this marginal note to be applicable not to all, but only to some people, namely those whom the later doctrine will locate in purgatory and who will eventually enter beatitude after purification (those who are in hell, instead, will not have any opportunity to be purified and then enjoy eternal contemplation):

Do not think that the Author (Gregory of Nyssa) said this (*sc.* that they will finally contemplate God) concerning all human beings [ἐπὶ πάντων], but only concerning those in whom there are only small, rare traces [λείμματα] of the life that is subject to passions [μικρά τινα τῆς ἐμπάθους ζωῆς]: they deserve to be forgiven, because of the frailty of the flesh [διὰ τὴν σαρκικὴν ἀσθένειαν]. It is from such leftovers that Gregory says that the souls will be purified [καθαίρεσθαι], as is maintained also by other Fathers [ἄλλοις τισὶ τῶν Πατέρων], including Dionysius the Areopagite and Diadochus of Photice.

Indeed, if we do not interpret Gregory's words in this way, we shall make it evident that Gregory not only says the opposite of what all the other teachers [πᾶσι τοῖς ἄλλοις διδάσκαλοις] say, but he would contradict even himself [ἐαυτῷ τὰ ἐναντία λέγειν]. For he has stated beforehand that the fruition [ἀπόλαυσιν] of the goods is inaccessible to sinners and unreachable [ἄβατον καὶ ἀπαρόδευτον τοῖς ἁμαρτωλοῖς]. Moreover, it is clear that he would also be at odds with the divine words [Θεῖοις ῥήμασιν, *sc.* those of the Bible], which declare that, in the case of these people, punishment will have no end [ἀπέραντον τὴν κόλασιν].¹²

Regarding the contradiction that the scholiast thinks of finding within Gregory's texts, in fact Gregory maintains that sinners will be punished, but therapeutically, so that they will reject evil and return voluntarily to God. The fruition of the goods is inaccessible to sinners as long as they are sinners, in Gregory's own view, but when they convert to God, the supreme Good, they are no longer sinners.

In *An. et res.* 104, Gregory is arguing that the doctrine of apokatastasis is grounded in 1 Cor 15:24-28, a text that already Origen had used in support of this theory (both buttressed it through the "theology of freedom", as in Gregory's case

¹² This is one interpretation of the adjective αἰώνιος in the Bible, but it is not necessarily the correct one; see below the next point ("second reason"). The use of ἀπέραντον by the scholiast does not reflect accurately the Biblical usage.

is also clear in the following locus¹³): “whatever is free will come to be in virtue. Now, the divine nature is the source of all virtues. As a consequence, in this nature will come to be those who have freed themselves from evilness/vice [κακία], that, as the Apostle [sc. St Paul] says, ‘God will be all in all’.¹⁴ This declaration, indeed, seems to me to confirm with all evidence the theory previously established,¹⁵ in that it affirms that God will eventually be both ‘all’ and ‘in all’”.

Now, with respect to this passage by Gregory, *cod. A* reports a scholium, which intends to rectify the interpretation of 1 Cor 15:28, denying that it refers to *apokatastasis*: “Those who will free themselves [ἀπηλλαγμένοι] from vice will be those who can no longer do anything evil [μηδὲν ἐνεργεῖν τι κακὸν δυνάμενοι],¹⁶ but not all will be free from punishment [οὐ πάντες ἔξω κολάσεως] as long as they live, or will enjoy the Kingdom of Heavens [τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀπολαύσουσιν]. Read what follows and you will learn the meaning of Paul’s sentence, ‘God will be all in all’ [τὰ πάντα ἐν πᾶσι Θεός], and remember what has been said concerning evilness [κακίας].” That some people, or many people, will be punished in the present life and especially in the other world was supported by Gregory himself, in *De anima* and elsewhere—so, on this point the scholium is not at odds with his ideas—but what the scholiast maintains, that not all will be eventually blessed and enjoy the Kingdom, does contradict Gregory’s theory. For Gregory explicitly asserted that “no creature of God will fall out of the Kingdom of God” (*Tunc et Ipse* 14 Downing) and even the devil will be converted by Christ.¹⁷

At the end of *An. et res.* 104, Gregory, on the basis of the former reference to 1 Cor 15:28, claims that Scripture, by foreseeing that God will be “all in all”, teaches “the total vanishing of evilness”. This very argument stems directly from Origen, but what is most relevant here is that a scholium in *cod. A* shows again the preoccupation with Gregory’s doctrine of *apokatastasis* and attempts to show that the vanishing of evil and the presence of God “all in all” does not mean universal salvation: “Therefore, (according to Gregory, God will be) in demons and sinners [ἐν δαίμοσιν καὶ ἐν ἁμαρτωλοῖς ἀνθρώποις] as well. And where will justice [τὸ δίκαιον] be, if these also will inherit the Good, as the just will do? Now, someone could say: But this will not happen in the same way [οὐχ ὁμοίως], but very differently [λίαν διαφορώτερον]. For where shall we put the torments that are due as a punishment [τὰ τῆς

¹³ An issue of *Modern Theology* devoted to Origen (2022) includes an investigation into Origen’s and Gregory’s theology of freedom and the latter’s dependence on Origen’s.

¹⁴ 1Cor 15:28.

¹⁵ Namely, the doctrine of *apokatastasis*.

¹⁶ Namely, in the other world nobody will be able to do evil. This is what Gregory refers to, according to the scholiast, and not to the liberation of all from evil by free choice (what Gregory is explaining).

¹⁷ Ramelli, *Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 372-440.

κολάσεως ἐπιτίμια], the inextinguishable fire [πῦρ ἄσβεστον], the never-dying worm [ἀτελεύτητον σκώληκα], and the like? Indeed, I think that the division into two [διχοτόμησιν] will be nothing else than being severed from God [τὸ κευωρίσθαι Θεοῦ]. Therefore, it is certainly the case that God will be glorified and worshipped by all, but for some this will happen through the enjoyment of the Kingdom, while for others while being punished. For, if we do not concede this, we shall show that the master (St Gregory) contradicts both the divine Scriptures and the other Fathers [τῇ θείᾳ Γραφῇ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις Πατράσι μαχησόμενον], and even himself [καὶ μὴν καὶ ἑαυτῷ], since elsewhere he explicitly teaches eternal punishment [κόλασιν αἰωνίαν], the impossibility for sinners to enjoy the goods [τὰ ἀγαθὰ] reserved for the just. But why are we saying ‘elsewhere’? In the present dialogue as well, as we have realised above, either we must understand what has been said earlier according to the interpretation we mentioned, or we must suppose that such sentences have been written by some interpolators [παρανετέθη ταῦτα ὑπὸ παραχαρακτῶν τινων] who do not believe the truth, or the master (St Gregory) will evidently seem to utter contradictory absurdities [ἀλλόκοτος ὁ διδάσκαλος φανεῖται]—which is intolerable even to state [εἰπεῖν ἄτοπον].”

The charge of contradicting other Patristic authors and even himself, levelled here against Gregory in case his words are interpreted as a reference to the doctrine of apokatastasis, is the same as is found in the scholium to *An. et res.* 92, examined above. This suggests that the author, or the source of inspiration, is the same.

In *An. et res.* 136, Gregory cites Phil 2:10–11 as another important scriptural prop of the theory of apokatastasis (along with 1 Cor 15:28): “This is what the Apostle states rather clearly, expressing the eventual universal harmony with the Good:¹⁸ ‘Every knee will bend before Christ, those of heavenly, earthly, and infernal creatures, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father’, designating with the ‘horns’ the angels and celestial beings, and signifying by means of the rest the intellectual creatures that come after the angels, namely us, who will all be engaging in one great feast characterised by harmony”. At this point, cod. A reports the following scholium, written again by a reader who was worried about Gregory’s doctrine of apokatastasis and intended to show that Gregory did not in fact support such a theory. In reference to Gregory’s description of the common eschatological feast of humans and angels alike, when humans will return to their state of ἰσαγγελία, the scholiast, vexed, comments: “What does he (St Gregory) say that the future feast [ἐορτήν] of the immaterial angels and human creatures will consist in? That all will unanimously recognise [συμφόνως ὁμολογεῖν]

¹⁸ Namely, God. See I.L.E. Ramelli, Harmony between *arkhē* and *telos* in Patristic Platonism and the Imagery of Astronomical Harmony Applied to the Apokatastasis Theory, *International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 7, 2013, 1-49.

the existence of God [εἶναι θεόν]. Therefore, regarding the acknowledgment of God's existence [τὴν θεογνωσίαν], all—sinners and righteous people—will agree [ὁμογνωμονήσουσιν], but they will certainly not be found in the same state [μῶς καταστάσεως] (otherwise, where would justice [τὸ δίκαιον] be?), but some will enjoy the Kingdom of Heavens, whereas the others will be excluded [ἐκτός] from it, as the Apostle states".

Note here again the objection from "justice" [τὸ δίκαιον], which is the same objection, even with the same expression (τὸ δίκαιον), as is found in the scholium to *An. et res.* 104, analysed above. The scholiast, towards the end of the present scholium to *An. et res.* 136, remarks that some people will be excluded from the divine Kingdom: this flatly contradicts, once again, what Gregory expressly states in *Tunc et Ipse* 14 Downing: "No creature of God will fall out of the Kingdom of God" (μηδενὸς τῶν παρὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ γεγονότων τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀποπίπτοντος).

There are other scholia, which express anxiety about Gregory's theory of universal restoration and try to argue that Gregory's declarations concerning apokatastasis in fact refer to purgatory, and not to universal restoration. Some glosses overtly denounce Origen's doctrine of the fall and apokatastasis; this is why it was vital to prove that Gregory, instead, never embraced the theory of universal restoration. At *An. et res.* 100, in which Gregory affirms that otherworldly punishment, especially fire, will purify sinners, a marginal scholium in cod. A observes: "It is necessary to interpret both this sentence and the following ones on the basis of the exegetical criterion that we have expounded earlier, in reference to the discussion of the vanishing of evilness [περὶ τῆς ἀφανισθείσης κακίας]. Please, read both carefully". The scholiast is clearly concerned with Gregory's theory of the otherworldly suffering not as a mere punishment of past sins, but as a purification, which will have an end and will bring about the "vanishing of evilness/vice/sin". This is clearly one of the premises for the doctrine of apokatastasis.

Towards the end of *An. et res.* 96, Gregory argues that the divinity knows itself and immediately loves itself, since satiety (κόρος) cannot apply to what is eminently good and beautiful, as God is. Now, a scholium in cod. A does not pay full attention to the context—the Godhead's own knowledge and love for itself—but, attracted by the word κόρος, begins to speak of the fall of the souls: not God's love, but the souls' love of God. The scholiast, then, begins to blame Origen's theory that certain souls began to feel satiety (κόρος) and fell, opposing to it the theory that the saints will never know satiety in their love of God: "The saints' loving attitude [ἀγαπητικὴ σχέσις] towards God knows no satiety [κόρον]. Thus, Origen's inventions [ἀναπλασθεῖς] are nonsense [λῆρος], namely the satiety of intellectual creatures [τῶν νοῶν κόρος], their fall [κατάπτωσις] because of it, and their being called back [ἀνάκλησις], on the basis of which Origen constructs the famous doctrine [τὸ

πολυθύλλητον δόγμα] of the preexistence and restoration of the souls [τῆς τῶν ψυχῶν προϋπάρξεως τε καὶ ἀποκαταστάσεως], carried around by an incessant movement [ἀσάτω φορᾷ περιφερομένων]—eager as he was to mix up the Greek myths with the Church’s truth [τὰ Ἑλληνικὰ μυθεύματα τῆ ἐκκλησιαστικῆ ἀληθείᾳ].” The scholiast does not take into account that Origen himself theorised that from the eventual apokatastasis there will be no new fall, because—as Paul claimed—“love never falls”,¹⁹ so the saints’ love will never be spoiled again by satiety or anything else. Indeed, after arguing that rational creatures will always keep their free will, but the Cross of Christ is so effective as to be sufficient to save all rational creatures in all aeons, Origen goes on to observe:

What is the factor that in the future aeons will prevent the freedom of will from falling again into sin? The Apostle tells us this quite pithily, when he states: “Love never falls.” This is why love is greater than faith and hope, because it is the only one which will prevent all sin. For, if the soul has reached such a degree of perfection as to love God with all its heart, with all its mind, and with all its forces, and its neighbour as much as itself, what room will be left for sin? . . . Love will prevent every creature from falling, when God will be “all in all.” . . . So great is the power of love that it attracts every being to itself . . . especially in that God has been the first to give us reasons for love, since he has not spared his only child, but he offered him for all of us.²⁰

The Pauline claim that “love never falls (out)” was so pivotal that Origen often hammered it home and based his argument on it also in *Comm. in Cant.* prol. 2.45. Origen was probably also mindful of Clement’s claim that “love does not allow one to sin” (*Strom.* 4.113.1), which in turn rested on Paul. Origen’s claim that charity-love will never fall out (πίπτει, ἐκπίπτει), thereby impeding any further fall from the blessedness of apokatastasis, seems to me to ground Gregory of Nyssa’s above-mentioned declaration that “no creature of God will fall out of the Kingdom of God”, with the use of ἀποπίπτοντος that echoes Origen’s and Paul’s statement (μηδενὸς τῶν παρὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ γεγονότων τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀποπίπτοντος, *Tunc et Ipse* 14 Downing).

¹⁹ 1Cor 13:8.

²⁰ “Quod autem sit quod in futuris saeculis teneat arbitrii libertatem ne rursus corruat in peccatum, breui nos sermone apostolus docet, dicens: ‘Caritas numquam cadit’ [ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε (ἐκ)πίπτει]. Idcirco enim et fide et spe maior caritas dicitur quia sola erit per quam delinqui ultra non poterit. Si enim in id anima perfectionis ascenderit ut ex toto corde suo et ex tota mente sua et ex totis uiribus suis diligat Deum et proximum suum tamquam se ipsam, ubi erat peccati locum? ... Caritas omnem creaturam continebit a lapsu, tunc cum erit Deus omnia in omnibus. ... Tanta caritatis uis est ut ad se omnia trahat..., maxime cum caritatis causas prior nobis dederit Deus qui unico Filio suo non pepercit, sed pro nobis omnibus tradidit” (*Comm. in Rom.* 5.10.195-226).

Second Reason: Patriarch Germanus Explained Away Gregory's Loci on Apokatastasis as "Heretic" Interpolations

Gregory's doctrine of apokatastasis was explained away by Germanus I, the Patriarch of Constantinople in 715-30, as a series of interpolations by heretics, so as to avoid attributing this doctrine to Gregory.

Patriarch Germanus, the son of a senatorial official, educated in a monastery, was involved in the controversy concerning iconoclasm (he was forced to resign in 730 from the patriarchate because he refused to embrace iconoclasm) and in that over Monotheletism and Ditheletism. Germanus, once he was created patriarchal bishop of Constantinople in 715, convened a synod to support Ditheletism. Such a controversy also produced an excellent victim: St Maximus the Confessor, who, as I shall argue below, represents an important factor in the consideration of Gregory's doctrine of apokatastasis as "orthodox" and acceptable to the Church. The Council of Nicaea in 787 praised Germanus, who became a saint in Greek and Latin Christianity. Being regarded very highly, his opinion on Gregory of Nyssa was influential.

His judgment on Gregory's philosophy and terminology of time and eschatology is especially relevant to the present research. Gregory of Nyssa in this respect is in line with Origen, who saw the final apokatastasis as the end of all aeons, when no one will be in an aeon (αἰών) any more, but God will be "all in all."²¹ Therefore, the "aeonian" (αἰώνιος) death, the "aeonian" (αἰώνιος) punishment, and the "aeonian" (αἰώνιον) fire mentioned in the New Testament are not understood by Gregory as "eternal" (as the late Augustine does, mainly considering the meaning of *aeternus* in Latin²²), but as pertaining to the world to come and lasting for a while.²³

Probably also because of this crucial linguistic misunderstanding, in the eighth century Germanus of Constantinople, convinced as he was that Gregory with "aeonian" (αἰώνιος) meant "eternal", since he also found the doctrine of apokatastasis unequivocally supported throughout Gregory's works and was unable to explain

²¹ Argument in I.L.E. Ramelli, Αἰώνιος and αἰών in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, *Studia Patristica* 47, 2010, 57-62 and: Gregory and Evagrius, *Studia Patristica* 101, 2021, 177-206; H. Boersma, Overcoming Time and Space: Gregory of Nyssa's Anagogical Theology, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 20, 2012, 575-612: esp. 579-584.

²² Argument in Ramelli, Origen in Augustine, 280-307.

²³ This is the same meaning that underlies the last line of the Credal formula that is still recited today: "the life of the world to come", which translates Greek "aeonian" life. It is not translated "life eternal". But life is also called *aīdios*, which means "eternal, everlasting" proper, while death for humans is never called *aīdios* in Scripture (and also by Origen, Nyssen and many others, as demonstrated in I.L.E. Ramelli and D. Konstan, *Terms for Eternity. Αἰώνιος and αἰίδιος in Classical and Christian Authors*, Piscataway, NJ 2007; new ed. 2013, reviewed by C. O'Brien, *The Classical Review* 60.2, 2010, 390-391), so it is never explicitly said to be eternal / everlasting.

away this apparent contradiction, thought that Gregory’s manuscripts had been interpolated by Origenists, as we shall see in two paragraphs. However, Gregory, like Origen and other Fathers, does not understand “aeonian” (αἰώνιος) punishment or perdition, or “aeonian” (αἰώνιον) fire, as “eternal” proper, but rather as lasting for an indefinite period, depending on each single case, in the world to come.

This was understood well by another opponent of universal restoration, Severus, bishop of Antioch (512–518). He easily recognised the presence of the doctrine of apokatastasis in Gregory and personally countered it: Severus “does not accept what is said by St Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, concerning apokatastasis” (τῷ ἐν ἁγίοις Γρηγορίῳ, τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ Νύσσης, τὰ εἰρημμένα περὶ ἀποκαταστάσεως οὐκ ἀποδέχεται).²⁴ Severus even used Origenism—a very blurred notion at that time—as a charge against an opponent, as is confirmed by the sixth-century Byzantine theologian Gobar: “Severus (of Antioch) wanted to blame St. Isidore, but he did not have any ground for this; thus, he falsely accused him of Origenism [φήμην αὐτῷ περιπλάττει Ὀριγενιασμοῦ].”²⁵ Severus’ Letter 98 provides a refutation of the doctrine of apokatastasis,²⁶ arguing among else that one’s sins are not measured on the basis of their duration (which would make eternal punishment impossible and unjust), but on the basis of the sinner’s intention, which, in his view, is not limited, so that otherworldly punishment will have to be infinite as well.

Some “heretics”, since “they know the loftiness of Gregory’s teaching and the abundance of his writings and are aware of his respected conception of the faith, spread among all humans”, inserted the passages on apokatastasis into Gregory’s own works, “full of the light of salvation”. Indeed, those heretics who “cherish the foolish doctrine [λῆρος] of the restoration [ἀποκατάστασις] of the race of the demons and of humans who are damned to an unending punishment” inserted in “the pure and perfectly sound spring of Gregory’s writings the inform, obscure, and pernicious products of Origen’s dreams, surreptitiously ascribing this foolish heresy to a man who is famous for his virtue and doctrine”. Such interpolators, “sometimes by faked additions, sometimes by their constant efforts to pervert orthodox thinking, have attempted to falsify many of Gregory’s works, which were beyond reproach”.²⁷

²⁴ Phot. *Bibl. cod.* 232, p. 291b Bekker.

²⁵ Ap. Phot. *Bibl. cod.* 232, p. 291b Bekker.

²⁶ I. Torrance, *The Correspondence of Severus and Sergius*, Piscataway, NJ, 2011. On Severus see P. Allen–R. Hayward, *Severus of Antioch*, London 2004.

²⁷ So Photius, *Bibl. cod.* 232, p. 291b Bekker.

Photius comments that against such falsifiers, “Germanus, the defender of the true faith, directed the sword, sharpened with truth, and left his enemies mortally injured”. Photius quotes from a lost work of Germanus of Constantinople, the Ἀνταποδοτικός, or *On Retribution*, whose aim was to demonstrate that the works of Gregory of Nyssa were “pure from the stain of Origenism”, Ὀριγενείου λώβης.²⁸ Here Germanus, after criticising the doctrine of the restoration of the demons and of human sinners after a limited punishment (μετά τινὰς ποιναὶς ὠρισμένας), produced against it “the words of the Lord, the preaching of the apostles, and the testimony of the prophets, which clearly expound that, just as the ineffable beatitude of the just is eternal [αἰώνιος], so is also the punishment of sinners infinite [ἀτελεύτητος] and unbearable”. Again, αἰώνιος is mistaken as meaning “eternal” and a synonym of ἀτελεύτητος. It is clear that in the development of the debate on apokatastasis the meanings of the different nuances that the two terms, αἰώνιος and αἰδῖος, bore was completely lost.²⁹ Thus, Germanus intended to “rescue” Gregory from the charge of supporting the Origenian doctrine of apokatastasis.

In Gregory *An. et res.* 97, a gloss in Codex B reports the philological strategy of Germanus with respect to Gregory’s doctrine of apokatastasis in this work.³⁰ It is a strategy based on expunction: “Blessed Germanus expunged as spurious [νόθα] a part of the preceding words, marking them with an obelos [ὠβέλιση].” Indeed, Germanus considered the following words of Gregory in *De anima*, which express universal apokatastasis, as a posterior addition: “The soul is necessarily attracted by the divine, which is akin to it. For it is necessary that in all respects and in all ways God can have what is proper to God. If the soul is light and has no superfluous burdens on itself, without any carnal annoyance that afflicts it, then it can easily and happily get close to what attracts it,” namely God, the supreme Good. And if a soul is charged with sins, as Gregory goes on to explain, it will be purified and will reach the Divine all the same. Now, Germanus saw that this argument amounts to the doctrine of apokatastasis and therefore denied that Gregory wrote this passage (as well as many others). In his view, this section was inserted later by “heretics”. More generally, in Germanus’ view, all the loci that support the doctrine of universal restoration in Gregory’s *De anima* are heretical interpolations.

²⁸ Photius *Bibl. Cod.* 232-233, p. 291b-292b Bekker, CPG 8022.

²⁹ For their differentiation in the Bible and earlier authors, see Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, “Time and Eternity”, in *The Routledge Handbook to Early Christian Philosophy*, ed. Mark Edwards, Oxford: Routledge, 2021, 41-54.

³⁰ Codex B corresponds to Codex Hasselmanianus.

If people thought that the passages on apokatastasis in Gregory's oeuvre were not written by Gregory himself, but by later, "heretical" interpolators, this can well represent another reason why Gregory of Nyssa was never condemned as an assertor of the theory of universal restoration.

Other thinkers, instead, easily recognised the presence of the doctrine of apokatastasis in Gregory—without endeavouring to deny it by means of an interpolation theory or other strategies—and did not accept such doctrine, such as the above-mentioned Severus of Antioch and, in the sixth century, the monk Barsanuphius of Gaza. Barsanuphius acknowledged that Gregory clearly taught apokatastasis, without trying to deny this: "Gregory of Nyssa himself speaks clearly of apokatastasis" (περὶ ἀποκαταστάσεως σαφῶς λέγει ὁ αὐτὸς Γρηγόριος ὁ Νύσσης).

Therefore, Barsanuphius faced a big problem when confronted by this fact and, at the same time, by the veneration of Gregory as a saint of the orthodox church.³¹ The same attitude emerges from the correspondence of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, a collection of letters in which the two ascetics of the desert of Gaza reply to many questions. In Letter 600, a monk asks Barsanuphius what his position is about Origen, Didymus, and Evagrius's *Kephalaia Gnostica*, especially about the doctrines of the preexistence of souls³² and apokatastasis. Barsanuphius and John, in their responses, entirely oppose such theories (600; 601). Barsanuphius' Letter 604 reveals how he resolved the conundrum above—namely, that Gregory supported the doctrine of apokatastasis and nevertheless was a saint. A monk asks Barsanuphius the reason why Origen's doctrine, especially that of apokatastasis, was supported by orthodox authors, and even saints, such as the Cappadocians (meaning Gregory of Nyssa primarily, but including Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus).³³

Now, Barsanuphius, far from attempting to deny that Gregory and the other Cappadocians supported the doctrine of apokatastasis (as Germanus and some scholiasts to *De anima* did), simply observes that even saints can have a limited understanding of the mysteries of God and can sometimes be wrong. Therefore, neither the monk nor Barsanuphius, who rejected the doctrine of apokatastasis, thought that Gregory did not actually believe in apokatastasis and that his works were

³¹ *C. opin. Orig.* PG 86.891–902.

³² It has been argued that Origen in fact did not support the preexistence of disembodied souls in rational beings once created substantially: I.L.E. Ramelli, Origen, in: *A History of Mind and Body in Late Antiquity*, eds S. Cartwright and A. Marmodoro, Cambridge 2018, 245-266; further in Origen on the Unity of Soul and Body in the Earthly Life and Afterwards and His Impact on Gregory of Nyssa, in: *The Unity of Soul and Body in Patristic and Byzantine Thought*, ed. J. Ulrich, A. Usacheva, and A. Bhayro, Leiden 2021, 38-77.

³³ On the presence of this doctrine in the three of them, see Ramelli, *Apokatastasis*, 344-461, and further for Basil, Basil and Apokatastasis: New Findings, *Journal of Early Christian History* 4.2, 2014, 116-136.

interpolated by heretics in order to have people deem him a supporter of universal restoration. He gave another solution, which classified the doctrine of apokatastasis as wrong, but he fully recognised the sanctity of Gregory as well as that of the two other Cappadocians (who also seem to have supported the doctrine of apokatastasis, although in a more limited scope and more prudently³⁴).

Third Reason: Maximus the Confessor Explicitly Accepted Gregory's Theory of Apokatastasis

Another reason for the lack of any condemnation of Gregory's doctrine of apokatastasis may lie in the fact that his doctrine of apokatastasis was declared to be acceptable by the Byzantine theologian St Maximus the Confessor (580-662). He lived after Justinian's so-called condemnation of apokatastasis. Given the authority of Maximus, his endorsement appears to be a strong reason why Gregory was never condemned.

Maximus based his thought on philosophical sources—never mentioned, but known directly or indirectly—and *patristic* philosophical sources, including Clement, Origen, the Cappadocians, Evagrius, Nemesius, and Ps.Dionysius. Maximus exerted a great impact on later Byzantine thought, and even in the West, thanks to Eriugena. This is why his influence in regarding Gregory as orthodox was remarkable. His most important and influential doctrines reside in theology—the concept of God and divine activity and works, from the Cappadocians and Dionysius—and Christology—diergetism and dithelietism, concerning the double energy and double will of Christ. The latter doctrine led to Maximus' trial and death, but it was soon ratified at the Sixth Ecumenical Council. Maximus rejected the theory of the preexistence of disembodied souls and their embodiment as a punishment due to sin: both doctrines were already refuted by Origen. Maximus' concept of the Logos and of *logoi* has a Plotinian and Origenian background. The role of divine will in creation, the knowledge of God and divine mysteries and the value of silence, as well as the allegorico-spiritual exegesis of Scripture, all maintained by Maximus, are all in line with Origen's thought and praxis.

Maximus' notion of evil, soteriology and eschatology, with the theory of the fall, the providential nature of death, the Origenian and Plotinian tenet that the end will be similar to the beginning—with the (Origenian) addition that the end will be superior to the beginning thanks to the passage from image to likeness (a Biblical and Platonist tenet: likeness to God/assimilation to God)—are all elements to which

³⁴ See the reference to the relevant arguments in the preceding note.

Origen had subscribed and which ground the doctrine of apokatastasis, which Maximus seems to have adopted, although with prudence (by means of strategies such as the veil of silence, the attribution to another person, and the like³⁵). Maximus' use of Plato's theodicy formula "God is not responsible" for evil, his interpretation of 1Cor 15:28, and the voluntary nature of the submission to God are other concepts that go back to Origen, the latter being related to his aforementioned theology of freedom. Maximus supported the free use of the *logos* by rational creatures; divine Providence, its omnipresence, and its explicit aim individuated as apokatastasis; a philosophy of history culminating in the "eighth day" of apokatastasis; the different use of ἄϊδιος and αἰώνιος, which corrects many misunderstandings of his philosophical theology and allows for the doctrine of apokatastasis; the role of Christ in the final deification or θέωσις, "a rest in perpetual movement" (στάσις ἀεκίνητον, I suspect inspired by Gregory of Nyssa's theory of epektasis), which will eternally (ἄϊδίως) take place around the Same the One and the Only (περὶ τὸ ταυτόν καὶ ἓν καὶ μόνον). It is frequently repeated that Maximus refuted Origen on many occasions, although in fact he refuted *Origenism* more than Origen himself; he was probably educated in an Origenistic monastery. It is significant that among Maximus' criticisms of Origenistic doctrines—again, not of Origen's own theories—that of apokatastasis is *never* included. Particularly the form of apokatastasis supported by St Gregory was overtly endorsed by St Maximus.

Maximus expresses explicitly his view of the eventual apokatastasis in *Questiones et dubia* 19. He is commenting on the notion of apokatastasis as is found in Gregory of Nyssa and is likely anxious to keep his distance from conceptions of restoration such as those of the "Isochrystoi" or of Bar Sudhaili, which ended up with coinciding with pantheism, and therefore were not acceptable to the Church. Thus, Maximus claims that the Church knows and therefore accepts three kinds of apokatastasis (which, I observe, were *all* supported by Origen and Gregory as well):

- the restoration of an individual to his or her original condition thanks to virtue (ethical apokatastasis, posited already by Philo of Alexandria³⁶ and inherited by Origen and his followers, including Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius);
- the restoration of humanity in the resurrection, which is a restoration to incorruptibility and immortality (this derives directly from Gregory of Nyssa's repeated equation between resurrection and restoration, ἀνάστασις and ἀποκατάστασις³⁷);

³⁵ Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 738-757.

³⁶ Argument in I.L.E. Ramelli, Philo's Doctrine of Apokatastasis: Philosophical Sources, Exegetical Strategies, and Patristic Aftermath, *The Studia Philonica Annual* 26, 2014, 29-55.

³⁷ Examined in Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 372-440; further: Gregory of Nyssa on the Soul (and the Restoration), 110-141.

– the restoration for which Maximus expressly invokes Gregory of Nyssa as its upholder: ἡ τῶν ψυχικῶν δυνάμεων τῆ ἁμαρτίᾳ ὑποπεσοῦσῶν εἰς ὅπερ ἐκτίσθησαν πάλιν ἀποκατάστασις, “the apokatastasis of the faculties of the soul to the state in which they were before being jeopardised by sin”. This spiritual restoration, too, like the resurrection of the body, will be universal, and will take place at the end of all aeons—as Origen maintained. This is St Maximus’ reflection on this kind of apokatastasis, which he accepts precisely because it was recorded by St Gregory of Nyssa:

For, just as the whole of human nature in the resurrection must have back the incorruptibility of the flesh in the time we hope for, so also the subverted faculties of the soul, during a long succession of aeons, will have to lose all memories of evilness [κακία] found in it. Then the soul, after crossing all aeons without finding rest, will arrive at God, who has no limit, and thus, by virtue of knowledge of, if not yet of participation in, the goods, will recover its faculties and be restored to its original state [εἰς τὸ ἀρχαῖον ἀποκαταστῆναι]. And the Creator will be manifested to it—the Creator, who is not responsible [ἀναίτιος] for sin.

This is Gregory’s doctrine of apokatastasis (expressed through Gregory’s phrase, εἰς τὸ ἀρχαῖον ἀποκαταστῆναι), which Maximus claims to be acceptable, like the two other preceding forms of apokatastasis accepted by the Church. According to Maximus’ “Gregorian” theory, souls that had their faculties subverted by sin will have them restored to their original condition, which existed before their contamination with evil, and are purified from evil in such a way as to have not even memories of evil left. Therefore, they will not fail to eventually adhere to the Good, who is God. Plato’s theodicy, which is here evoked in his words from the *Republic’s* Myth of Er, θεὸς ἀναίτιος, “God is not responsible” for evil, was abundantly used by Gregory of Nyssa in building up his own theology of freedom, which depended in turn on that of Origen, and in both Origen and Gregory theodicy and the theology of freedom are closely related to their doctrine of apokatastasis.³⁸ In fact, exactly for the sake of theodicy, in order to defend “the justice of God” (*Dei iustitiam*—as Rufinus understood very well), Origen built his whole philosophy of history and his theory of apokatastasis.³⁹

The close link between resurrection and restoration that Maximus posits here derives from Origen and Gregory, who inspired Evagrius in turn, just as the idea that the resurrection of human bodies is only a part of the general resurrection

³⁸ Documentation above, n. 14.

³⁹ As is argued by Ramelli, Origen, Bardaisan, 135-168, and *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 137-215.

and transformation of the whole universe, and that the restoration of the faculties of the soul will eliminate the effects of sin. Evagrius will expand on this.⁴⁰

It is not to be ruled out that Maximus realised what I have observed at the beginning of this essay: namely, that Gregory, like Origen, supported the theory of apokatastasis in defence of Christian orthodoxy. This is why he has no problems in adopting and teaching the doctrine of apokatastasis in the form in which Gregory had taught it.

Fourth Reason: Gregory Exiled by Arianising “Heretics”, His Orthodox Contribution to the Council of Constantinople, and His Proclamation as a Touchstone of Orthodoxy

Another factor, of “political” or “church-political” nature, in the lack of any ecclesiastical condemnation of Gregory and his doctrine of apokatastasis is in all probability the exile that Gregory sustained at the hands of “heretics”—the “Arian” or “neo-Arian” party still active in his day and supported by the Roman emperor, Valens. This reinforced Gregory’s reputation as an orthodox thinker, indeed one of the principal theologians of the Council of Constantinople, which, as we shall see later in this paragraph, declared Gregory a model of orthodoxy.

Gregory was falsely incriminated by the Arian party, exiled for this, and returned home later triumphalistically. This enhanced his reputation as orthodox theologian. Indeed, in 375/6, Gregory was accused by Demosthenes, the Arian vicar of Pontus, of having unduly spent ecclesiastical finances and having been created bishop not regularly. As a consequence, Gregory was deposed by a synod of “Arian” bishops, belonging to the party of Emperor Valens,⁴¹ and was exiled. After two years (376-378), after the death of Valens himself in the Battle of Hadrianople, Gratian became the only emperor of both the Eastern and Western Roman Empire. He was no Arian, but a Nicene, and was a friend and disciple of St Ambrose (in turn a follower of Origen in many respects). One of the first official actions he decided was the revocation of all the penalties, decreed by Valens, against the Nicene leaders.⁴² Gregory was one of them.

⁴⁰ Argument in my *Origen and Evagrius*, in *Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, eds. M. Edwards, D. Pallis, and G. Steiris, Oxford: OUP, 2022, 94-108.

⁴¹ See Basil, *Epp.* 225, 231, 232, 237 and 239.

⁴² Socrates *HE* 5.2; Sozomen *HE* 7.1; Theodoret *HE* 5.2; *Cod.Theod.* 16.5.5.

In the summer or autumn of the year 378, Gregory then returned to Nyssa: his Letter 6, which most probably refers to his return from the exile,⁴³ shows the local people's love and enthusiasm towards him. The letter addresses Bishop Ablabius, perhaps the same person to whom Gregory's work *To Ablabius That There Are Not Three Gods* is dedicated. In sections 8-11, Gregory reports that, when he finally entered Nyssa with his carriage, "the people appeared suddenly" and "they thronged around us so closely that it was not easy to disembark from the carriage".⁴⁴ Once "we had with difficulty persuaded them to allow us a chance to descend and to let our mules pass through, we were pressed on every side by the crowd all around us, so much so that their excessive affection all but made us faint". Besides being received by the people in a triumph, Gregory was also received by the consecrated virgins, perhaps led by Gregory's own sister Theosebia, who probably was a presbyter and was responsible for the χορός (literally, "choir") of consecrated virgins that existed at Nyssa. Indeed, among those who welcomed Gregory was "the choir of the virgins," who greeted him at the entrance of the church of Nyssa with lanterns in their hands (section 10), like those of the wise virgins of the gospel parable and those of the final hymn of Methodius' *Symposium*, both works with which Gregory was familiar. "We saw a stream of fire coursing into the church, for the choir of virgins was processing in line into the entrance of the church, carrying tapers of wax in their hands, kindling the whole to a splendour with their blaze". Then Gregory entered and "rejoiced" and, after finishing the prayers, wrote the letter to Ablabius. The terms with which Gregory describes the scene with the women in the church may be interpreted to mean both a monastic choir and a group of virgins; since there are no details in the letter concerning psalmody or songs, "the choir of the virgins" here may be identifiable with the group of consecrated virgins of the church of Nyssa. They lived near the church, which they did not abandon to meet Gregory, and were probably led by Theosebia, presbyter of the church of Nyssa, colleague and ὁμότιμος of their bishop, who lived in Nyssa close to him (which is implied by Gregory Nazianzen, when he speaks of Gregory's and Theosebia's "living together", συζῆσαι⁴⁵).

Gregory himself speaks of his exile as due to heresiarchs: he denounces the intrigues of the chiefs (ἐπιστατοῦντες) of heresy, who chased him out of his episcopal see and Cappadocia (*Macr. GNO VIII/1, 387*). But his return was more than a great success.

⁴³ It might also refer to Gregory's return from his captivity in Sebasteia in 380.

⁴⁴ Trans. A. Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters*, Leiden 2007, 131-142.

⁴⁵ See I.L.E. Ramelli, Theosebia: A Presbyter of the Catholic Church?, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, 2010, 79-102.

Besides being a victim of the heretics, Gregory was indicated by the Council of Constantinople—in which he played a core role regarding the dogmatic definitions of *ousia* and *hypostasis* in the Trinity and as anti-“Arian”—and Emperor Theodosius to be the touchstone of orthodoxy. He was listed together with Helladius and Otreius among the normative orthodox bishops for the diocese of Pontus: it was proclaimed that all those who were in agreement with Gregory’s doctrine were orthodox. This proclamation, which seems to stem directly from the Second Ecumenical Council, was immediately ratified by Theodosius in July 381 in his edict, *Episcopis tradi* (*Cod. Theod.* 16.1.3). Gregory himself attributed much importance to this conciliar-imperial decision, so as to state that, owing to it, he was on a par with bishop Helladius of Caesarea, his own metropolitan: in his first letter to Flavian, bishop of Antioch, Gregory remarks that “the Council bestowed the same ecclesiastical honour [κατὰ τὴν ἱεροσύνην τὸ ἀξίωμα, ἴση] and the same privilege to both [μία γέγονεν ἀμφοτέροις ἡ προνομία],⁴⁶ or rather the same solicitude for the rectification of the common belief [μᾶλλον δὲ ἡ φροντίς τῶν κοινῶν διορθώσεως].”⁴⁷

Thus, Gregory was proclaimed and regarded as an anti-heretical bishop and the criterion of orthodoxy. These two connected factors—his exile by heretics and his contribution to the Ecumenical Council, which decreed his proclamation, ratified by the Emperor, as a canon of orthodoxy—also concurred to the lack of any condemnation of Gregory.

Fifth Reason: Gregory, His Family, and His Friends as Saints, and Conclusions

Gregory—unlike Origen—was a saint himself, he celebrated famous saints (such as the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste in homilies, and his sister Macrina, including her miracles in *Vita Macrinae*), and was the brother and son of saints, and the friend of saints. This is probably another reason why Gregory was not condemned by the Church, especially for his doctrine of apokatastasis. He was the son of St Emmelia and the brother of many siblings, who were proclaimed saints: St Macrina, St Basil of Caesarea, St Theosebia, St Peter of Sebaste, St Naucratus... St Gregory Nazianzen, who was a friend of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa and became a saint himself, praised Gregory and his family as “a host of saints”. His Epigram 164, section 161, celebrates the extraordinary family of Gregory of Nyssa and exalts St Emmelia, his mother, and her children: “three of her (Emmelia’s) sons were illustrious priests/bishops; a daughter of hers was a colleague of a priest/bishop, and the rest of her children like a host of

⁴⁶ Sc. to both Helladius and Gregory.

⁴⁷ *Epist.* 1, GNO 8/2.3-12: esp. 11-12.

saints” (τρεις μὲν τῆσδε ἱερῆς ἀγκαλῆες, ἢ δ' ἱερῆος σύζυγος, οἱ δὲ πέλας ὡς στρατὸς εὐαγέων). The first three siblings mentioned by Gregory Nazianzen are St Basil, St Gregory himself, and St Peter, who were priests and bishops; the daughter who was the “colleague of a priest/bishop” is Theosebia, whom in his Letter 197 as well, Gregory Nazianzen calls again “colleague of a priest/bishop” (ἱερέυς) and of equal dignity (ὁμότιμος). St Theosebia had the same dignity as St Gregory had.

Not only his friend Nazianzen, but Gregory of Nyssa himself praised his siblings who became saints, especially St Macrina and St Naucratus, St Peter, and of course St Basil—whose theological work Gregory continued—besides his mother, St Emmelia.⁴⁸ Gregory describes with admiration that Macrina lived together with her former slaves in her monastery, sharing her ascetic life with them. Gregory, full of veneration, in *Vita Macrinae* GNO 8.1.377.25–378.5 recounts how Macrina convinced Emmelia to join her ascetic community and live together with their own former slaves, now made “of equal dignity” (ὁμότιμοι) with their former owners. Emmelia accepted and renounced being served by her former slaves: she “gave up the services performed by her slaves” (καταλιποῦσαν τὰς ἐκ τῶν ὑποχειρίων θεραπείας).

St Gregory also exalts his brother St Naucratus for adopting “a life without possessions” (ἀκτήμονα βίον),⁴⁹ when he embraced an ascetic lifestyle, and for the “renunciation of possessions” (ἀκτημοσύνη).⁵⁰ Naucratus allowed one of his former slaves, Chrysaphius, to follow him, not in order to be served by him, but to share “the same choice of life with him”, namely ascetic life. Far from being served by his ex-slave, Naucratus made himself a servant of people in need: as Gregory reports with admiration, Naucratus “served with his own hands some old people who lived together with poverty and illness”.⁵¹

St Macrina is extolled by Gregory principally—and with increasing importance—first in a letter, then in *Vita Macrinae*,⁵² the bio-hagiography dedicated to her, and finally in the dialogue *De anima et resurrectione*. Here, she plays the role of Plato’s Socrates in the *Phaedo*, of which *De anima et resurrectione* is the Christian remake (both Socrates and Macrina philosophise just before dying), and of the priestess Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*.⁵³ Besides being the main character of the dialogue *De anima*, and being

⁴⁸ Analysis in my *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity*, Oxford 2016, 190-211.

⁴⁹ *Vita Macrinae* GNO 8/1. 378.17.

⁵⁰ *Vita Macrinae* GNO 8/1. 382.12.

⁵¹ *Vita Macrinae* GNO 8/1. 379.6–7.

⁵² Investigation in my *The Life of Macrina and The Life of Evagrius: Erotic Motifs and Asceticism*, in *Novel Saints. Ancient Novelistic Heroism in Late Antiquity and Early Medieval Hagiography*, ed. K. De Temmerman, Turnhout: Brepols, 2023.

⁵³ See my *Gregorio di Nissa sull'anima e la resurrezione*, Milan: Bompiani - Catholic University, 2007.

the protagonist of the bio-hagiography *De vita Macrinae*, Macrina appears for the first time in Gregory's Letter 19 to John.⁵⁴ Sections 6-10 are devoted to her, who had recently passed away: the letter seems to have been composed less than a year after her death. She is presented here as a professor/master (διδάσκαλος) of Gregory, exactly as she is addressed in *De anima*. In the letter, at the beginning of section 6, she is styled τοῦ βίου διδάσκαλος, "teacher of my (Gregory's) way of life"; in *De anima* she is called by Gregory διδάσκαλος and presented as a teacher of Christian philosophy. According to Gregory's letter, she was also "a mother in place of our mother" for Gregory, and had "confidence towards God", παρρησία, the same trait that was attributed to Theosebia, their common sister, by Nazianzen.⁵⁵ By means of her παρρησία, Macrina elicited "assurance" in Gregory Nyssen (as Theosebia did to "pious women" according to Gregory Nazianzen). She lived as "exiled" in Pontus (at Annisa) with a "choir of virgins", the same expression as Gregory uses in his Letter 6 to designate the consecrated virgins at Nyssa, probably led by another of his sisters, St Theosebia, a deaconess or likely a presbyter.⁵⁶ St Macrina and her nuns were all dedicated to ἰσαγγελία (Letter 19.8), an important ideal for Gregory: the perfect Christian philosopher is "equal to the angels". The following works devoted to Macrina will expand more on her and will exalt her life (the *Vita*) and her teaching of Christian philosophy, mainly Origen's ideas (*De anima*).⁵⁷

St Basil is extolled by Gregory in prefaces to his own works, orations, and the like. For instance, Gregory, continuing Basil's *Heaëmeron*, at the beginning of his *De hominis opificio*—devoted to their common brother Peter, who was made the bishop of Sebaste and a saint⁵⁸—utters incalculable praises of Basil and his works, especially in comparison to his own work. After high praises of St Peter himself as full of virtues, Gregory proffers a real exaltation of Basil, his model for the present work, and whose work Gregory is continuing:

Basil, our father and common teacher,⁵⁹ thanks to contemplation, has made the sublime order of the universe easy to grasp to the majority of people... I am very far from being able even only of admiring Basil in a worthy way; however, I had the idea of adding what was lacking in the thought of that great thinker, not in order to adulterate his labour through falsifications—it would not be allowed to offend his outstanding mouth, which I deem the true author of my own discourses—

⁵⁴ GNO 8./2.62-68.

⁵⁵ Documentation in Ramelli, Theosebia.

⁵⁶ See previous note.

⁵⁷ See Ramelli, Gregory of Nyssa on the Soul (and the Restoration), 110-141; The Life of Macrina.

⁵⁸ The dedication reads as follows: "To his Brother Peter, Servant of Christ, Gregory the Bishop of Nyssa".

⁵⁹ Note here the same characterisation as Gregory offers for Macrina: father and teacher (Basil) = mother and teacher (Macrina).

but so that the glory of the master may not seem lacking in his disciples. For, if Basil's *Hexaëmeron* were defective with respect to the speculation concerning the human being, and none of his former disciples were engaged in filling this gap, some blame would reasonably have a grasp against his great glory, as though Basil had not wished to produce in his hearers an intelligent and perspicacious disposition. Now, instead, I dare set out—within the limits of my own capacities—to explain what is missing in Basil, and if in my discussion there should be anything worthy of his teaching, this will have to be entirely considered as a merit of my teacher (Basil); if, instead, my treatment should not reach the level of that excellent speculation, Basil himself will be exempt from that charge, namely that of giving the impression of not wanting to infuse in the disciples any degree of ability, and will escape any blame, whereas I would seem liable to the attacks of those who always peer at the occasion for criticising other people, as though, in the narrowness of my heart, I had no sufficient room and capacity to receive the wisdom of our professor (Basil)...

In *De anima et resurrectione*, the main protagonist is Macrina (and indeed one title of this dialogue is Τὰ Μακρίνια, *Macrina's Arguments*), but the occasion of the dialogue between Macrina and Gregory is the recent death of Basil, their common brother. This dialogue will be shortly followed by Macrina's own death. The first part of the dialogue is indeed the debate between Gregory and Macrina concerning the death of a person, especially a beloved and great brother. The contrast is between *pathos*, represented by Gregory, and *logos*, represented by Macrina:

Basil, great among the saints, had passed on from human life to God, so there was a common reason for grief for the Churches, and, while his sister and master (Macrina) was still alive, I was going to share with her the loss of our brother. And my soul was profoundly grieving, afflicted beyond measure for this loss, and I was looking for someone who could keep me company in weeping, who could be oppressed by grief to the same extent as I was. Once we were before one another, the master (Macrina), presenting herself to my eyes, elicited even stronger sorrow in me: for she also was by then prey to the deadly illness. But, as the experts in horse racing, after allowing me to be carried around by the impetus of grief for some time, then she endeavoured to bridle by means of her reasoning, as through a kind of brake, and to correct, the emotion that was upsetting my soul. And she immediately adduced the famous claim by the Apostle (St Paul) that one should not be afflicted thinking of those who have fallen asleep in death: for such grief is typical of those people alone who have no hope for resurrection.

And, while my heart was still all boiling with sorrow, I said: How is it possible among human beings to obtain such a result? For a natural aversion to death is innate in everyone; those who see people die cannot easily endure such a sight, and those towards whom death comes try hard to avoid it, as far as possible ... We see that all human solicitude aims at this: that we may remain alive...

But why—the master (Macrina) asked—why, why does the experience of death seem to you sorrowful to the highest degree per se? In order to accuse or calumny it, indeed, it is not enough to have recourse to the habit of those who avail themselves of reason least of all ... Perhaps such a fear upsets and torments your mind, as though the soul were not intended to endure eternally, but should come to an end itself, along with the dissolution of the body.

Then, since I had not yet succeeded in recovering my rational clarity after that grievous turmoil, I replied in a manner that was perhaps too arrogant, without considering carefully what was said. For I stated that the divine words look similar to prescriptions, in that they force us to believe that the soul endures eternally, but we are not led to this thesis by any rational argument...

Macrina rejoined: Leave the vain reasonings that are not ours (sc. not Christian), in which the inventor of falsehood (sc. the devil) brings together deceitful conjectures in plausible appearance to the damage of truth. You rather consider the following: this way of thinking concerning the soul means nothing else than being hostilely disposed to virtue and look merely at the present pleasure, without hopes for the life that extends into eternity—the only life thanks to which virtue will overcome.⁶⁰

Thus, Gregory's status as a saint, that of his mother, siblings, and friends as saints, and his praise of them, together with the other reasons I have adduced earlier, contributed to the absence of any condemnation of Gregory's thought, especially his doctrine of apokatastasis.

These five factors, which I have pointed out and outlined in the present essay, together with Gregory's support of apokatastasis within an anti-heretical context (as I pointed out in the first section), are arguably the main reasons why Gregory's doctrine of apokatastasis was considered acceptable to the Church and was never condemned in any Council or Synod. There can be other reasons as well. Even Justinian's so-called condemnation of Origen in 543 and 553 was not directed in any way against Gregory of Nyssa. On the contrary, as we have seen, Gregory was indicated by the Council of Constantinople and Emperor Theodosius as a touchstone of Christian orthodoxy.

⁶⁰ *An. et res.* 12-17, sections 1-2 Ramelli (*Gregorio di Nissa sull'anima*). The last sentence by Macrina means that virtue will triumph completely only in the otherworldly life, in which full justice and the appropriate reward will reign. In the present life, virtue is not rewarded, or not entirely, given the injustice and corruption that often reign here, but in the Kingdom of God virtue will certainly overcome.

