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Contemplation as a Way to Achieve Enlightenment in Thoughts of St. Gregory of Nyssa

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Abstract

Contemplation is a profound and important spiritual practice in the Christian tradition, especially in the thought of St. Gregory of Nyssa. This paper aims to explore the role of contemplation as a path to achieving enlightenment and mystical union with God. The method used in this paper is a qualitative method, namely the author analyzes the thoughts of Gregory of Nyssa, who emphasizes that contemplation is not only a tool to achieve inner peace, but also a means to understand divine truth, know oneself, and develop compassion for others. The results of this study are that Gregory sees contemplation as a process of self-purification that brings the soul closer to God, through a continuous spiritual journey (epectasis). Gregory's thought invites to experience a profound spiritual transformation, find meaning in relationships with God and others, and achieve inner peace in the midst of a busy and divided world.

Keywords
Contemplation, Path, Enlightenment, Spiritual transformation

INTRODUCTION

In this modern era, everything fast and full with distraction, lots individual experience spiritual emptiness and crisis meaning in life they. Increasing technology forward and stylish life is getting better materialistic often distances man from reflection deep about objective life and relationships they with something transcendent. In a condition this, search will peace inner and deeper understanding deep about existence man the more become urgent needs.

Phenomenon This seen in increasing practice meditation and mindfulness that comes from various spiritual traditions, including in Christian teachings. Thoughts of St. Gregory of Nyssa regarding contemplation as road going to enlightenment give perspective which is relevant for modern man seeking serenity and spiritual

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transformation. St. Gregory of Nyssa, a theologian big from 4th century, taught that through contemplation, a person can experience enlightenment and unity with God, a very important concept in spiritual development.

Relevance St. Gregory's teachings in the modern context increasingly real with the amount research that shows benefit from practice reflective and spiritual towards mental health. A published research in *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021) states that practice meditation and contemplation can reduce stress, increase welfare emotional, as well as help somebody find meaning living in an everchanging world complex.[1]

With thus, the study about draft contemplation in the thoughts of St. Gregory of Nyssa are very relevant for give outlook about How practice This can become solution for search meaning and tranquility in modern life. This writing aiming for dig more in thought of St. Gregory regarding contemplation and relating it with spiritual challenges faced man this moment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Between 2022 and 2024, several academic journals and articles have been published discussing the theological thought of Gregory of Nyssa. Notably, an article appeared in Theologica Xaveriana, Vol. 72 (2022), titled "Theological Work in Gregory of Nyssa and the Renovation of Theological Work Today: Conceptual Framework from De Vita Moysis and In Canticum Canticorum" ("Quehacer teológico en Gregorio de Nisa y renovación del quehacer teológico hoy. Marco conceptual desde De Vita Moysis e In Canticum Canticorum"), authored by Gabriel Alberto Jaramillo Vargas and Orlando Solano Pinzón.

This article explores how Gregory of Nyssa's theological methodology can contribute to the renewal of contemporary theological practice. By focusing on two of his significant works, De Vita Moysis and In Canticum Canticorum, the authors propose a conceptual framework that highlights the dynamic and transformative nature of theological reflection in Gregory's thought. The study underscores the relevance of his mystical and exegetical approach for addressing present-day theological challenges.[2]

[1] James Benjamin Schuurmans-Stekhoven, "Just World Beliefs Mediate the Well-Being Effects of Spiritual/Afterlife Beliefs among Older Australians," *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 33, no. 3 (July 3, 2021): 332–349.

[2] Gabriel Alberto Jaramillo Vargas and Orlando Solano Pinzón, "Quehacer teológico en Gregorio de Nisa y renovación del quehacer teológico hoy. Aportes desde In Canticum Canticorum y De Vita Moysis

Second, the article titled "Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Theology: The Role of Hostile Powers in the Homilies on the Song of Songs", authored by Gabriel Thomas, was published in Theological Studies in 2022. This study revisits Gregory's mystical theology by examining the significance of hostile forces in his Homilies on the Song of Solomon. Thomas offers a nuanced interpretation of how Gregory integrates the presence of spiritual opposition into the soul's ascetical and mystical journey toward union with God. The article thus contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between mysticism, moral struggle, and spiritual progress in Gregory's exegesis.[3]

Third, in 2023, Studia Ceranea published an article titled "The Unity, Power, and Energy of the Holy Trinity in the Theology of Gregory of Nyssa", written by V. Zhukovskyy. This work analyzes Gregory's theological articulation of the Trinity, particularly focusing on the concepts of unity (henotes), power (dynamis), and energy (energeia). Zhukovskyy examines how these three dimensions interrelate within Gregory's Trinitarian theology, shedding light on the Cappadocian Father's contribution to the development of early Christian doctrine on divine unity and action.[4]

Fourth, in 2024, Medieval Mystical Theology published an article by Noah Karger titled "The Mystical and Moral in Gregory of Nyssa: Recovering a Critical Link". This study emphasizes the intrinsic connection between mystical experience and moral formation in Gregory of Nyssa's theology, with particular attention to The Life of Moses. Karger argues that for Gregory, the mystical ascent is inseparable from ethical transformation, highlighting how spiritual progress is rooted in an ever-deepening moral conversion. The article contributes to the growing appreciation of Gregory's integrated vision of the spiritual life.[5]

Fifth, in the same year, Isidoros C. Katsos published an article in Modern Theology titled "A Letter that Killeth: Gregory of Nyssa on How (Not) to Read

para la elaboración de un marco conceptual que contribuya a la renovación" (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2020), accessed April 8, 2025, https://repository.javeriana.edu.co/handle/10554/51525.

[3] Gabrielle Thomas, "Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Theology: The Role of Hostile Powers in *Homilies on the Song of Songs* ," *Theological Studies* 83, no. 4 (December 2022): 537–553.

[4] Viktor Zhukovskyy, "The Unity, Power and Energy of the Holy Trinity in the Theology of Gregory of Nyssa," *Studia Ceranea* 13 (December 21, 2023): 695–713.

[5] Noah Karger, "The Mystical and Moral in Gregory of Nyssa: Recovering a Critical Link," *Medieval Mystical Theology* 33, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 14–27.

Scripture, Platonically". In this work, Katsos investigates Gregory's hermeneutical approach to Scripture, especially in light of Platonic philosophical influences. The article critically examines how Gregory navigates the tension between literal and spiritual readings, arguing that while Gregory draws from Platonic tradition, he simultaneously subverts it to develop a distinctly Christian mode of scriptural interpretation rooted in the mystery of Christ and the transformative power of the Word.[6]

Allegory and Mysticism in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa

In CW Macleod's writing that examines the allegorical interpretation of Scripture and mystical experience in the works of the Patristic Fathers such as Origen and St. Gregory of Nyssa. The article highlights their theological and interpretive approaches in understanding Christian doctrine.

St. Gregory of Nyssa's interpretation of Moses' life as a symbol of the spiritual journey emphasized free will, the infinite nature of God, and the stages of spiritual progress. St. Gregory of Nyssa's writings reflect Plotinus's ongoing search for God through partial knowledge or avoidance of direct mystical union. Gregory of Nyssa also interpreted the theophanies in Moses' life as reflections of Christian theology, especially the ignorance of God's role and the role of Christ as the *Tabernacle*.[7] Origen, on the other hand, distinguished between simple and enlightened faith, using allegory to express divine truth in Scripture. Origen emphasized the need for purity of heart and divine grace to interpret the spiritual meaning of Scripture.

This article describes the complex interplay between allegory and mysticism in the works of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. The interpretations of both serve to clarify theological positions rather than convey personal mystical experiences that highlight the importance of faith in understanding God.

Gregor von Nyssa's 'Homilien zum Canticum' auf dem Hintergrund seiner 'Vita Moysis'[8]

[6] Isidoros C. Katsos, "A Letter That Killeth: Gregory of Nyssa on How (Not) to Read Scripture, Platonically," *Modern Theology* 40, no. 1 (January 2024): 147–171.

[7] C. W. Macleod, "Allegory and Mysticism in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa1," *The Journal of Theological Studies* XXII, no. 2 (October 1, 1971): 377.

[8] Franz Dunzl, "Gregor von Nyssa's 'Homilien Zum Canticum' Auf Dem Hintergrund Seiner 'Vita Moysis,'" *Vigiliae Christianae* 44, no. 4 (December 1990): 371–381.

Franz Dünzl in his article analyzing the work of Gregory of Nyssa, namely *Homilien zum Canticum* (Homilies on Canticum) by considering the context of *Vita Moysis* (Life of Moses). Franz Dünzl explains that *Homilien zum Canticum* is a series of homilies written by Gregory of Nyssa about the book Canticum Canticorum (Song of Solomon), this work emphasizes the allegorical and spiritual interpretation of the texts. Gregory uses *Canticum Canticorum* (Song of Solomon) as a metaphor for the relationship between humans and God that focuses on sacrifice and love.

Vita Moysis is a work that describes the life of Moses and interprets the spiritual events of his life. Gregory of Nyssa uses the story of Moses to describe the spiritual journey and transformation of man in which the importance of self-sacrifice and direct experience with God are part of the spiritual journey.

On the Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa[9]

This article explores the intellectual evolution of fourth-century Greek Christianity, particularly through the lens of Gregory of Nyssa, highlighting significant changes from earlier Christian interactions with pagan philosophy. Gregory of Nyssa's idea of a continuous progress toward perfection reflects a personal and relational understanding of God. Gregory of Nyssa's emphasis on the infinite and incomprehensible nature of God contrasts with Platonic views. Gregory of Nyssa's distinction between the soul's distinction from God and Plotinus' concept of henosis (union with the divine) contrasts with the theology of Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory of Nyssa's theology combines Platonic ideas while maintaining a uniquely Christian perspective. Gregory's emphasis on the unknowability of God serves as a theological counterpoint to Eunomius' rationalist definition of God, which positions Gregory as an expansionist in theological discourse. The debate with *Eunomius* (the Arian leader) influenced Gregory's thinking on the infinity of God. *Eunomius* argued that God's essence could be fully understood through logic, while Gregory rejected this claim with apophatic theology. The theology of Gregory of Nyssa developed in response to the Council of Nicaea which led to a radical understanding of God as infinite and limitless.

From several research and articles that are used as material reference still not yet there are some who explicit explain meaning contemplation as road for reach enlightenment in thought of St. Gregory of Nyssa. So that contemplation as road for

[9] John Rist, "On the Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa," *Trinity College Dublin* 169 (2000): 129–151.

reach enlightenment in the thought of St. Gregory of Nyssa became the focus of novelty in writing this article.

METHOD

In this paper, the author uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach to document and analyze the practice of contemplation as a path to achieving enlightenment in the perspective of St. Gregory of Nyssa. The data was obtained through a literature study using articles and several quotations. to obtain relevant data. This method allows to recognize the values of contemplation as a path to achieving enlightenment.

DISCUSSION

St. Gregory of Nyssa and a Way to Enlightenment

St. Gregory of Nyssa who lived in the late 4th century entered the Cappadocian fathers, at that time there was a shift in pagan society to Christian monotheism which was legalized by Emperor Constantine through the Edict of Milan (313 AD) [10] and during the time of Emperor Theodosius I (late 4th century), Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. This change caused many conflicts in the midst of society that was leaving traditional polytheism and starting to adopt Christian monotheism, as well as with all the challenges, tensions, and social pressures on the Christian community.

It was during this transitional period that there was a great need for basic teachings of the Christian faith, often still influenced by a pagan worldview, as well as new paradigms of ethics, such as love for one's enemies, social justice, and respect for human dignity, which sometimes conflicted with the values of the Roman world.[11] The church at this time also developed in the organization of liturgy and worship. [12] Focusing on prayer, meditation, and the contemplative life which became an important part of Christian spirituality at that time. Therefore, Gregory supported

[10] Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* , 5. print. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr, 1996), 42–43.

[11] Marilyn Morris, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them: Second Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 171–172.

[12] Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* , 2. ed. (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 175–177.

monasticism[13] as a way of life that allowed one to pursue holiness and closeness to God, so that the monastic community became a place of spiritual refuge and education for many people at that time.[14]

As a theologian living in this transitional time, Gregory used his expertise in philosophy and theology to guide the emerging Christian community. He became a bridge between the Greek intellectual tradition and the Christian faith, while addressing social challenges such as injustice, doctrinal debates, and the need for spiritual formation of the people.

Contemplation as a Way of Enlightenment

Gregory taught that God is beyond all human concepts and understanding. Therefore, true enlightenment can only be achieved through enlightened ignorance is paradox Gregory's theology stated that the more near soul with God, the more He realize His infinity and inability man in understand in a way rational in other words, namely the soul transcends rational thought to become like God. [15]Gregory describes Moses' journey up Mount Sinai as a metaphor for contemplation: from light, to darkness, and finally to the mystical experience of God's presence.[16]

Gregory viewed the spiritual journey as something that is constantly evolving or ongoing (epectasis).[17] Draft This different with unification Plotinus' mysticism (henosis) because God remains not limited and unlimited accessible. Enlightenment is not a final goal, but a never-ending process in which the soul continues to grow in love and knowledge of God. He uses the analogy of *boundless love*, where the more we know God, the greater our desire to draw near to Him. Gregory believed that contemplation begins with self-purification (katharsis) which involves three stage that is liberation from lust (apatheia), enlightenment mind (photismos) and unification with God (theosis) In his works, he often emphasized the importance of abandoning worldly passions and calming the mind as prerequisites for entering into

[13] Monasticism is method religious life that is lived somebody with method deny affairs worldly so that it can fully dedicate live on work spirituality.

[14] Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* , 1st paperback printing, [Nachdr.]., The transformation of the classical heritage 20 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2008), 190–192.

[15] Gregory and Gregory, *The Life of Moses* , ed. Abraham J. Malherbe, The Classics of Western spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 94–95.

[16] Macleod, "Allegory and Mysticism in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa1," 366.

[17] Gregorius et al., eds., *Homilies on the Song of Songs* , Writings from the Greco-Roman world v. 13 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 307.

a deeper relationship with God. Gregory understood enlightenment not as the attainment of mastery, but as union with the infinite God. He emphasized that God is present in the limitless, so that the search for Him is an ongoing journey.[18]

Christ, in Gregory's view, is the perfect image of God and the primary means by which man can see God. In contemplation, Christ is the mirror that reflects divine light to the soul. By gazing spiritually upon Christ, man is transformed into His glorious image.[19]

RELEVANCE

The thought of St. Gregory of Nyssa provides a contribution that is still relevant in modern times, especially contemporary theology, by offering a framework that emphasizes a continuous spiritual journey or *epektasis* and encourages social responsibility, especially for the oppressed poor. In his thought, he taught that God cannot be fully understood rationally alone, especially when linked to the context of modernity that emphasizes rationality and science. Through this approach, it provides space for interfaith dialogue in the context of divine mysticism.

Gregory's thoughts on contemplation find resonance in Eastern spiritual traditions, such as hesychasm in the Orthodox Church. Practices such as the Jesus Prayer reflect a focus on silence, simplicity, and inner revelation in the light of the divine. This shows that contemplative spirituality remains relevant beyond its time and across traditions.

Continuous spiritual growth gives an understanding that the relationship with God is not static but a dynamic journey as a continuous transformation towards love and enlightenment. The importance of silence, prayer, and contemplation becomes a means to get close to God, just as the metaphor of Moses going up the mountain becomes a symbol of the mystical journey.

The thought of St. Gregory of Nyssa is a call to a deeper life, one that continues to seek God in love, contemplation, and concrete action. He taught that faith is not an end in itself, but rather a dynamic journey into an inexhaustible mystery. reflect dynamics existential human beings who continue look for meaning, identity, and purpose life. In a world that is often shallow and divided. as well as all-round instant,

[18] Dunzl, "Gregor von Nyssa's 'Homilien Zum Canticum' Auf Dem Hintergrund Seiner 'Vita Moysis,'" 374.
[19] Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2018), 132.

his teachings are an invitation to experience true spiritual transformation and find meaning in relationship with God and others. that is make peace with ignorance and making Divine darkness as room encounter with God.

Phenomenon *burnout,* anxiety identity, and a lot of emptiness experienced many people reflect despair man from its deepest spiritual dimension. St. Gregory of Nyssa gives emphasis that introduction will God not only results from calculation information, but rather fruit from emptying self and openness from the unsolved mystery can understood. In case This contemplation No Again exclusive for monks but as need fundamental modern man for return to self the deepest self.

Journey without end is invitation for keep going deepen relation man with creation. Nature that continues to be exploited and humans feel isolated from environment alive, so that the teachings of St. Gregory of Nyssa can interpreted repeat as call ecological that is see natural No as object but as room revelation. Contemplation can become means for reconstruct relation ecological between relation with God in harmony with all over creation.

An education system that emphasizes competence cognitive and achievement academic, contemplation present as the one who liberates with perspective that man not only creature think just but a creature that also contemplates mystery. With approach This help in to form whole person, low heart, and open to the transcendent presence of God.

CONCLUSION

St. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us that theology is not merely a matter of intellectual inquiry, but a transformative journey of experiencing and loving God throughout the course of life. His theological vision presents the search for God not as a finite task of comprehension, but as an ever-unfolding pilgrimage marked by love, humility, and openness to divine mystery.

By emphasizing contemplation and silence, Gregory offers a pathway to inner peace amid the noise and fragmentation of the modern world. His thought challenges us to renew our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with God—inviting a reintegration of the spiritual and ethical dimensions of life.

Thus, the search for divine enlightenment is not a form of religious nostalgia, but an ongoing existential task. It is a lifelong calling that transcends time, continually inviting the human person into deeper communion with the Divine.

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