

Compassionate Eschatology

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Orthodox Eschatology and St. Gregory of Nyssa's
De vita Moysis
Transfiguration, Cosmic Unity, and Compassion

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INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THE present volume is to introduce readers to a compassionate eschatology from the vantage point of various theological attitudes and traditions. What follows, then, is an outline of the eschatological themes that comprise an Orthodox Christian perspective. As we navigate through an Orthodox conception of the hope endowed to all creation when Christ “trampled down death by death,” and which is assimilated by the Church through ascetic struggle, participation in the liturgical theodrama, and veneration of icons that depict and embody the Eschaton, the sentiment that “compassion” is a worthy foil through which to apprehend an Orthodox eschatology is justified.

With the conviction that a dialogue on the validity of a compassionate eschatology should depend not only on the outcome of theological conjecture and syllogism, but must also include a historical precedent, especially from the Church fathers, to circumscribe and frame this dialogue, the present essay will also appeal frequently to St. Gregory of Nyssa's celebrated philosophical and ascetic treatise, *De vita Moysis*,¹ as a highly apposite patristic voice to guide our investigation.

1. For all English references, I will be using Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, translated by Ferguson and Mahlerbe (hereafter simply *Vit. Moys.*). Since this essay is appearing in a book whose audience is concerned more with Christian eschatology than with Gregory of Nyssa himself, all references to the original Greek will not be to

It has become whimsically aphoristic for Orthodox Christians to answer theological inquiries, and especially the more difficult ones, with, “It is ultimately a mystery!” But, this is true of its eschatology perhaps more than for any other theological issue. While the ecclesial schisms that have characterized much of Christianity’s history over matters of Christology, Triadology, and the like are at least comprehensible on a primal level, it is utterly unfathomable the many more recent schisms that have compounded as a result of squabbles over events that have not yet even occurred!² An Orthodox articulation of eschatology is therefore unique in its reticence, refusing to speculate beyond the creedal affirmation that Christ “is coming in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end,” which motivates his Bride to “look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

Yet, very little if anything in Orthodox theology is untouched by its eschatological hope, so that Fr. Andrew Louth is able to claim, “[I]n the doctrine of *ta eschata*, ‘the last things,’ the whole of Christian doctrine—creation, incarnation, redemption, and deification—finds its fulfillment.”³ Consequently, in considering the innumerable attendant facets, teachings, and ontological embodiments of Holy Tradition, the daunting task ahead is made less so if we focus on those features that most pointedly manifest the compassionate character of Orthodox eschatology. With this in mind, we will limit our discussion to an Orthodox understanding of the parousia (second coming), bodily resurrection, and final judgment, all essentially a unified manifestation and suffusion of the cosmos with Christ’s glory, which contributes deeply and emphatically to a compassionate eschatological outlook but that contrasts markedly the violent and retributive models that have dominated Western eschatology. Before this, however, we will explore the preparation of humanity here on earth for its encounter with Christ’s final judgment. In this sense, the present essay concerns itself with both (1) the microcosmic manifestation of eschatological hope in personal ascetic struggle, communion with the Church, and liturgical observance of the present age, and (2) the macrocosmic, and *de facto* unity of humanity in the ineluctable encounter of

the usual *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, on which the English translation is based, but will instead be to the much more accessible: Migne, *Patrologiae Graeca* (hereafter PG).

2. See Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 133f.

3. Louth, “Eschatology,” 233.

the entire cosmos with the glory, mercy, and love of Christ at the final judgment in the age to come.

Although we will elaborate on this in more detail later, it is important to keep in mind throughout the essay that the Orthodox Church teaches an “eschatological monism” that opposes the notion that humanity is predestined, or destined in any respect, to undergo a transportation to one of two corporeal locations, but rather proposes that the “location,” understood figuratively as a great mystery,⁴ is actually monadic and uniform, yet subjectively experienced multifariously based on one’s ontological composition in either passions (*pathē*)⁵ or virtue (*aretē*).⁶

ONTOLOGICAL PREPARATION FOR THE FINAL JUDGMENT

An Orthodox understanding of the last things is incomplete if it does not first address humanity’s and, perhaps more deliberately and faithfully, the Church’s anticipation and preparation for the Eschaton. It is this expectancy, and the attendant anthropological and soteriological characteristics, that ultimately elicits Christ’s compassion as curative rather than retributive and that underscores the singularity and uniformity of Christ’s final judgment as inexorably wrapped up in the uniformity of the Godhead and of humanity—indeed, the entire cosmos—that he has come “not to condemn . . . , but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17 RSV).

To begin, then, we must explore the role of free will that permits human beings to both prepare for the final judgment in this life and to continually reject in self-condemnation or else accept anew the Savior of the cosmos in the hereafter. Orthodox soteriology and eschatology are both intimately linked to the freedom of the human will,⁷ which St. Gregory of Nyssa describes in terms of an equidistant *suspension* between two prospective and latent invaders: virtue and passions, life and death, God and the Evil One.⁸ On the one end of the spectrum, virtue

4. *Vit. Moys.* 2.242; PG 405B.

5. See Smith, *Passion*, 62f., 68–72, 204–6. On ἀπάθεια or the suspension of passion, see Daniélou, *Platonisme*, 63ff., 92–103.

6. Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 262.

7. See *Vit. Moys.* 1.12; 2.3; 2.74; PG 301D; 328B; 348A-B.

8. For an exploration into the freedom of the will in Gregory’s thought, see Blowers, “Perpetual Progress,” 156; Geljon, “Divine Infinity,” 162; Ferguson, “God’s Infinity,” 70; Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 24.

is voluntarily self-subdued and non-encroaching or is innately so since it is by nature love, which refuses to coerce, while on the opposite end Christ has conquered death, rendering it impotent through his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. In his *De vita Moysis*, St. Gregory of Nyssa elucidates God's refusal to coerce by invoking the plague of darkness that the Hebrews nevertheless experienced as light: "It was not some constraining power from above that caused the one to be found in darkness and the other in light, but we men have in ourselves, in our own nature and by our own choice, the causes of light or darkness, since we place ourselves in whichever sphere we wish to be."⁹

This freedom, or equidistant suspension between the virtues and passions, factors into both humanity's preparation and future encounter with the universal divine judgment. With this in mind, Orthodox lay-theologian, Paul Evdokimov, claims, "The ability to refuse God" is not only "the pinnacle of human freedom," but also engenders "the necessity of hell, which comes from human freedom."¹⁰ "We prepare our own hells for ourselves," Evdokimov states elsewhere, "closing ourselves in from the love of God who continues to dwell in us without change."¹¹ Metropolitan Kallistos Ware affirms a compassionate eschatology despite one's prerogative to reject Christ: "The best we can do, is to hold in balance two truths, contrasting but not contradictory. First, God has given free will to man, and so to all eternity it lies in man's power to reject God. Secondly, love signifies compassion, involvement; and so, if there are any who remain eternally in hell, in some sense God is also there with them."¹² In like manner, St. Isaac the Syrian maintains, "It would be improper for a man to think that sinners in Gehenna are deprived of the love of God. . . ."¹³ We will later discuss how this free will also more positively factors into the possibility or hope expressed in Orthodox *theologoumenum* (theological opinion) for the *apokatastasis tōn pantōn*—the final restoration of all.

9. *Vit. Moys.* 2.80: PG 349A-B. Cf. *Vit. Moys.* 2:45–46; 2.56; 2.65; 2.216: PG 337D-340A; 341B-C; 344C-D; 397B-C. Cf. Denning-Bolle, "Mystical Flight," 108–11 and Robert W. Jenson, "Gregory of Nyssa," 536.

10. Evdokimov, "Eschatology," 32f.

11. *Ibid.*, 31.

12. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 135f. Cf. Louth, "Eschatology," 242.

13. St. Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies*, "Homily 28," 141.

For the Orthodox Church, soteriology, ecclesiology, and liturgy can never be separated from eschatological considerations. Accordingly, Fr. Andrew Louth observes, “The last things are not remote future events, but events made present in the risen Christ, and in the risen Christ the boundaries between death and life have been broken down, as has the separation implicit in our experience of space and time.”¹⁴ This is why St. Gregory of Nyssa writes about “the Preparation for the Sabbath,” this being “the present life in which we prepare for ourselves the things of the life to come,”¹⁵ and in other works expounds on the mystery of the Eschaton as the eighth day, which is more indigenous to Orthodox eschatological discourse.¹⁶ Similarly, St. Symeon the New Theologian teaches that “[i]n this present life, . . . by repentance, we enter freely and of our own will into the divine light” and, “owing to the divine love and compassion,” are placed under a “judgment [which] is made in secret, in the depths of our soul, to purify us,” so that we do not become like “those who hate the light, [for whom] the second coming of Christ will disclose the light which at present remains hidden, and will make manifest everything which has been concealed.”¹⁷ It is important to note therefore how the freedom of the will also enables human beings to prepare for the final judgment in this life before our repose, prompting Ivan Ilyin to synopsize the ascetical life as a “school of preparation for death.”¹⁸

Although the Orthodox teaching on free will ostensibly exposes a heightened vulnerability to divine retribution since it absolves both God and the Evil One from direct manipulation, it instead both assists in one’s preparation for the final judgment as a divinely devised anthropological maneuver and underscores the arduousness (and in its deified *telos*, near impossibility) of this preparation. On the one hand, humanity’s *mutability* and susceptibility to progress in virtue exhibits the positive value of free will. For instance, with respect to Gregory of Nyssa, Gerhart Ladner remarks, “Only if man received mutability . . . would mankind as a whole, be able to reach its pre-ordained *pleroma* [fullness], only thus would it have the opportunity to return to God.” Otherwise, “man would

14. Louth, “Eschatology,” 236.

15. *Vit. Moys.* 2.144.

16. *Inscr. Ps.* 2.5.52–3, p. 136f.: PG 44.504D–505A.

17. Quoted in Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 233f.

18. Quoted in Sakharov, *Love*, 224.

have remained fixed in spiritual aversion from God, together with the fallen angels.”¹⁹

This mutability permits what the Orthodox Church teaches as *theosis*, or deification. Recalling the eschatological character of theosis, Nicholas Berdyaev avers, “Paradise is theosis, deification of the creature.”²⁰ With the final judgment in mind, Fr. John McGuckin explains, “Deification in Orthodox theology . . . [means] . . . that the grace of God ‘conforms’ the saints to his presence so that they can see and enjoy the divine radiance which is impossible for the unclean to witness except as a torment.”²¹ Elsewhere, McGuckin equates the Holy Tradition of the Church with theosis rather than a mere system of doctrines and canons, and refers to it as the “eschatological sign of salvation.”²²

The event that links this present ascent in theosis and the future parousia is the Transfiguration of our Lord, which gives content to both the *telos* of one’s preparation in this life and the glory of Christ’s mercy emanating at his parousia and final judgment. Fr. Sergei Bulgakov, for instance, notes the soteriological significance, with theosis as its goal, of the Transfiguration, in which “Christ becomes visible for all in the radiance of divinity in glorified humanity: God in man and Man in God, the God-man, drawing to Himself all the tribes of the earth.”²³ Fittingly, therefore, Andreas Andreopoulos recognizes the “relationship between the Transfiguration and paradise, or eschatological glory” in the impressive mosaic engulfing the apse of the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo in Classe, Ravenna, and remarks that “[A]lthough most scholars have identified the mosaic as primarily a depiction of the Transfiguration, . . . [t]he overall depiction is an eschatological scene”²⁴ since it includes several “symbols of paradise.”²⁵

Our ascetic struggle toward theosis in this life has as its stage the post-Pentecostal epoch, at the commencement of which the Holy Spirit, reminiscent of the kenosis—or self-emptying—of God in the Incarnate Christ, descends to the earth and infuses the cosmos more covertly

19. Ladner, “Philosophical Anthropology,” 84.

20. Berdyaev, *Destiny*, 287.

21. McGuckin, *Church*, 198.

22. *Ibid.*, 96.

23. Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 395.

24. Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis*, 118.

25. *Ibid.*, 120.

in contrast to the patently visible glory of Christ's future parousia.²⁶ Reflecting the singularity of Christ's final judgment as love is the oneness of the Church, to which Pentecost gave witness as tongues of fire. In a post-lapsarian world, the fragmentation of humanity and all the cosmos—the severed relationships plaguing all of creation—gives way to the unity of Christ's body, the Church, as a manifestation of eschatological healing and fullness in the present life. Because salvation is communal, reflected in the unity of humanity and the cosmos that we will explore in more detail later, theosis is attained more fully in communion with the Church as a manifestation of this unity.

In this way, our own individual theosis is a microcosm of the fullness or catholicity of the Church as *sobornost*—the relinquishment of individualism, or one's self-will, to emphasize what is in common,—and the unity of the Church is a microcosm of the eschatological, yet mysteriously also the present *de facto*, unity of all humanity and creation.²⁷ It is this all-embracing and exhaustive unity that elicits a monistic final judgment, informed by the singularity of the divine essence, as love, which therefore characterizes Orthodoxy's compassionate eschatology. With this unity squarely in site, McGuckin claims, “[T]he church is itself the Eschatological Mystery”—the “holy of holies in the eschatological order, and the quality of its life of prayer, intercession, and charism is inextricably related to the eschaton.”²⁸

The theater for the manifestation of the Eschaton in the present life is the Divine Liturgy. Although the performance of an eschatological theodrama is reflected in the symbolism of the Liturgy, the movement toward partaking the Eucharistic body and blood of Christ is itself an authentic ascension into the spiritual realm and a genuine co-participation in heavenly worship with the angels and saints who reside there. The Liturgy begins with the proclamation, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.” With this, the parishioners wait eagerly in anticipation of the liturgical parousia of Christ, after which they gain entrance into the heavenly banquet so that they may partake of the Holy Gifts.

The parousia is represented variously in patristic literature by the bishop's descent from his throne for the Gospel reading in St. Maximos the

26. Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 394.

27. See Sakharov, *Love*, 135f.

28. McGuckin, “Eschatology,” 133.

Confessor's *Mystagogia*²⁹ and in the *Ecclesiastical History* of St. Germanos I, Patriarch of Constantinople,³⁰ while St. Symeon of Thessaloniki believed that the Great Entrance of the Holy Gifts represented the second coming.³¹ This is the reason parishioners stand during the Liturgy facing East when they pray—in anticipation of Christ's *parousia*—and the Liturgy unfolds in such a way that the Eucharistic banquet is enjoyed *after* the second coming represented in either the bishop's descent from his throne or the Great Entrance. Further, when the parishioners exit the nave into the narthex, typically they are greeted by an icon of the final judgment on the West wall to remind them of their need for ontological refinement through the purity of heart initiated by repentance.

Indeed, the ascetic struggle toward ontological purity of the communicant is requisite for participation in Holy Communion.³² This preparation for Holy Communion, typically comprised of pre-Communion prayers and the cultivation of a life in Christ, further informs the eschatological character of the Liturgy. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann also considers the communal character of this precondition:

[W]e must understand that what “happens” to bread and wine happens because something has, first of all, happened to us, to the Church. It is because we have “constituted” the Church, and this means we have followed Christ in his ascension; because he has accepted us at His table in His Kingdom; because, in terms of theology, we have entered the Eschaton, and are now standing beyond time and space; it is because all this has first happened to us that something will happen to the bread and wine.³³

To understand the need for attentiveness to the purity of one's heart and communion with the Church before receiving the Eucharistic Gifts, Mary, who is portrayed in icons of the final judgment as standing to the right of Christ interceding to him on behalf of all humanity, and her role as Theotokos, or God-bearer, is of paramount importance. Of the many Old Testament types that the Orthodox Church uses to explain Mary's salvific role, the burning bush is most germane to our purposes. Mary, divinely chosen as the pinnacle of obedience and purity that God ex-

29. Wybrew, *Liturgy*, 97.

30. *Ibid.*, 124.

31. *Ibid.*, 168f. See also *ibid.*, 182 and Louth, “Eschatology,” 234–36.

32. McGuckin, “Eschatology,” 133.

33. Schmemmann, *World*, 37.

pected of his people after generations of apostasy, was uniquely worthy to bear within her womb God himself and therefore was not consumed in the same way that the bush was suffused with the divine fire without being consumed. As St. Gregory of Nyssa observes, “From this we learn also the mystery of the Virgin: The light of divinity which through birth shone from her into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth.”³⁴

Similarly, Orthodox Christians offer up pre-Communion prayers, among them for instance the observations of St. Simeon Metaphrastes who, after noting that Christ’s blood was generated by the “pure blood of the Virgin,” describes the mingling of his blood with our own during Holy Communion with further allusions to the divine fire: “Freely, you have given your body for my food, you who are a fire consuming the unworthy. Do not consume me, O my Creator, but instead enter into my members, my veins, my heart. Consume the thorns of my transgressions. . . . Cleanse me, purify me and adorn me. . . . Show me to be a temple of your one Spirit. . . . as I become your tabernacle through Communion.”³⁵

Moreover, the degree to which one becomes worthy to partake of the Holy Gifts during the eschatological heavenly banquet is experienced multifariously much in the same as is the final judgment. St. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, illuminates the implications of the uniformity of the manna, which is understood by Orthodox to represent the Eucharistic Gifts,³⁶ when he observes, “In appearance the food was *uniform*, but in quality it was varied, for it conformed itself to each person’s desire,”³⁷ which exhibits the manifold function of the manna depending on the need of the one receiving it. All of these liturgical elements, from our preparation to its culmination, mysteriously share in the actual unfolding of the last things that themselves transcend the temporal world, which are attested to by our attentiveness to the purity of heart that calibrates not only our reception of the Eucharistic Gifts at the heavenly banquet after the parousia but also our encounter with the final judgment of Christ as merciful love.

34. *Vit. Moys.* 2.21.

35. Quoted in Evdokimov, “Eucharist,” 253.

36. Wybrew, *Liturgy*, 63.

37. *Vit. Moys.* 2.137: PG 368A–B.

This attentiveness to the purity of one's heart cultivates an ontology that manifests itself in the same compassion—merciful love—that the final judgment offers intuitively. Our preparation in the present life therefore contains an ethical component, of equity with wealth and abstinence from violence, in proportion to our ontological purity and attainment of *theosis*. It is a compassionate eschatology, therefore, because our own transfiguration through ascetic struggle cultivates compassion for the world in coincidence with the mercy of God that we encounter at the final, universal judgment—as the divine Light.³⁸

This compassion has an eschatological character not only in our present incomplete participation in what we anticipate for the future in its fullness, but also in the way it harmonizes with the final judgment of Christ as mercy in the Eschaton. McGuckin puts it this way: “[T]he Christian ethic clearly emerges as the mainspring of the church's eschatological awareness, and it will serve as the leaven to bring about the fulfillment of its eschatological calling in any generation.”³⁹ By fleshing out the details a bit more, McGuckin continues,

The struggle for ethical purity, then, will be perfected only in the lively sense of repentance consequent on the acknowledgment of its “weakness of the flesh.” In becoming a virtuoso of repentance the church learns how the finite stands before the Infinity, and becomes skilled in teaching a broken world about the “quality of mercy”—both its own and that of the Lord whom it manifests. In this, the church fulfills its fundamental eschatological duty to the world as laid upon it in Luke 24:47: the preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.⁴⁰

Moreover, this compassion involves an eternal solicitude beyond the grave made possible by death's impotence and made evident in the intercessory prayer of the saints on their behalf. A more recent Russian ascetic from Mount Athos, St. Silouan, manifests this tenderness perfectly, not only when he “wept with pity for the poverty-stricken people, and felt compassion for the whole universe and every living creature,”⁴¹ but with a more eternal focus when he observed, “There are people who desire the destruction, the torment in hell-fire of their enemies, or the

38. Louth, “Eschatology,” 236.

39. McGuckin, “Eschatology,” 133.

40. *Ibid.*, 133.

41. Silouan, *Silouan*, 374.

enemies of the Church. They think like this because they have not learnt divine love from the Holy Spirit, for he who has learned the love of God will shed tears for the whole world.”⁴²

However, we have yet to answer why the freedom of the will staves off juridical retribution from God if he and the Evil One have been absolved from any interference. First, the arduousness of participation in virtues is underscored by the infinity of the ascent in coincidence with the infinity of the Godhead—resumed even posthumously—that Gregory of Nyssa terms *epektasis*,⁴³ which therefore deems at least some deficiency inevitable.

Moreover, this arduousness also attests to the constraints and disadvantage of the human situation. For instance, Gregory of Nyssa remarks, “[T]he gnawings of desire are frequently active even in the faithful”⁴⁴ and, using medical terminology, observes, “[H]uman nature is especially drawn to this passion, being led to the disease along thousands of ways.”⁴⁵ Therefore, while the freedom of the will ideally places humanity in a position to unite with Christ,⁴⁶ it simultaneously asks humanity to perform the impossible rendering inevitable at least some degree of failure.⁴⁷ Accordingly, our environment creates a “conflict in us, for man is set before competitors as the prize of their contest,”⁴⁸ while ultimately “free will [has an] inclination to evil”⁴⁹ so that “[i]t was only to be *expected* that some . . . would be filled with lust.”⁵⁰

The *expected* or *inevitability* of sin and the arduousness of one’s ascetic struggle are what elicit a remedial rather than juridical response

42. *Ibid.*, 275.

43. On *epektasis* in Gregory’s thought, see Blowers, “Perpetual Progress,” 151–71; Daniélou, *Platonisme*, 309–326; Meredith, *Gregory of Nyssa*, 13f., 22; 318f.; Smith, *Passion*, 11f., 18f.; and von Balthasar, *Presence*, 37f. On the ultimate infeasibility of the complete purification of the soul or ascent of the holy mountain, see *Vit. Moys.* 1.5–8; 2.220; 2.224–26; 2.230; 2.235; 2.238–39; 2.242: PG 300C–D–301B; 400A–B; 400D–401B; 401C–D; 404B; 404C–405A; 405B.

44. *Vit. Moys.* 2.277: PG 416A–B.

45. *Ibid.*, 2.271: PG 413B–C.

46. *Ibid.*, 2.5–6. Cf. Ferguson, “God’s Infinity,” 71.

47. On the ineluctability of sin, see Balthasar, *Presence*, 71–87. Cf. *Vit. Moys.* 2.299: PG 424A.

48. *Vit. Moys.* 2.14: PG 329D–332A. Cf. 2.276: PG 416A.

49. *Ibid.*, 2.76: PG 348B–C. Cf. 2.271: PG 413B–C.

50. *Ibid.*, 2.299: PG 424A.

from Christ inherent to a compassionate eschatology. The reason why the dualism of a juridical response is not sufficient is because, as Evdokimov avers, “[t]here is no separation not between good and evil people, but such a dividing line, rather, runs through the heart of every one of us.”⁵¹ “Far be it,” declares St. Isaac the Syrian, “that vengeance could ever be found in that Fountain of love and Ocean brimming with goodness! The aim of His design is the correction of men.”⁵² The image of fire is therefore “not as torture and punishment, but as purification and healing,”⁵³ for “[t]he Eastern Church remains a stranger to every penitential principle.”⁵⁴ This is the fire that St. John Climacus says burns those who “still lack purification, . . . [but] enlightens [those who guard the heart] in proportion to the perfection they have achieved.”⁵⁵

In agreement with the inevitability of participation in the passions, as unavoidable and evoking the same feeling of helplessness as contracting a disease, *De vita Moysis* is replete with medical images of healing which are antithetical to juridical measures that generate the reverse outcome. Gregory therefore labels both pleasure and passions as an “illness” or “disease”⁵⁶ and three times designates Christ, the lawgiver, as the “physician [who] accommodated the remedy to what the evil had produced.”⁵⁷ In a particularly expressive passage, Gregory relates how “the physician induces vomiting by his medicines,”⁵⁸ and elsewhere insightfully outlines the role of the Incarnate Christ to minister “to the condition of those who had become ill” when he enlists Moses, as a type of Christ, to co-suffer with humanity as one who “even besought God for mercy on their behalf.”⁵⁹ This truly demonstrates “the divine concern for us”⁶⁰ and appreciation of the inexpedient circumstances with which humanity must contend.

51. Evdokimov, “Eschaology,” 27.

52. St. Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies*, “Homily 48,” 230.

53. Evdokimov, “Eschaology,” 27.

54. *Ibid.*, 30.

55. St. John Climacus, *Ladder*, “Step 28,” 280.

56. *Vit. Moys.* 2.70–71; 2.79; 2.303: PG 345B–D; 348D–349A; 424C.

57. *Ibid.*, 2.278: PG 416B. Cf. 2.87; 2.172: PG 352A–B; 380C–D

58. *Ibid.*, 2.87: PG 352A–B. Cf. 2.277: PG 416A–B.

59. *Ibid.*, 2.261: PG 412A–B.

60. *Ibid.*, 2.214: PG 396D–397A.

Culpability, therefore, does not circumscribe human guilt and criminality to incite a proportionate execution of divine retribution, but instead identifies the infirmed in need of God's healing and restoration by determining who is proximate to the offense.⁶¹ Accordingly, Dunstone claims that for Gregory, "Humanity is thus pitiable, rather than culpable,"⁶² and further suggests that both St. Paul and the Nyssen bishop are "more concerned with the culpability of the disease and . . . with the misfortune of those who suffer from it."⁶³ Sin, Evdokimov explains, "is a sickness to be healed even if the cure is the blood of God."⁶⁴ Consequently, Gregory of Nyssa lists the casualties in both the ascetical struggle and the Triune God's eschatological restoration of humanity as one's "trespasses,"⁶⁵ "irrational envy,"⁶⁶ "idolatry,"⁶⁷ "injustice,"⁶⁸ "arrogance,"⁶⁹ "passion,"⁷⁰ and "lust of the flesh."⁷¹ Indeed, "[s]in is the real serpent, and whoever deserts to sin takes on the nature of the serpent."⁷² So much does Gregory sympathize with the unenviable situation within which humanity finds itself that the only time he uses the word "blame"⁷³ is in reference to the devil "whom the history blames (*κατηγο*) [for] producing evil in men [which] leads them to the subsequent sin."⁷⁴

ESCHATOLOGICAL MONISM AND THE FINAL JUDGMENT

The Orthodox Church teaches that a human being enters an intermediate state after death and receives a particular, individual judgment in anticipation of the final, universal judgment at the second coming. The Orthodox conception of how this individual judgment unfolds after one

61. *Ibid.*, 2.193; 2.206: PG 389B-C; 393C-D.

62. Dunstone, *Atonement*, 10.

63. *Ibid.*, 16.

64. Evdokimov, "Eschaology," 30.

65. *Vit. Moys.* 1.62: PG 321C.

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*, 2.15: PG 332A.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Ibid.*, 2.78: PG 348D.

71. *Ibid.*, 2.276: PG 416A.

72. *Ibid.*, 2.275: PG 413D-416A.

73. Gk. *κατηγο*.

74. *Vit. Moys.* 2.279: PG 416B-C.

has reposed is incomplete and serves less to accurately describe what will actually occur and more as a commentary on other, more enshrined teachings from the vantage point of a human being's preparation for death and communion of the saints. The consensus of the Church fathers on the matter is fragile, so that the liturgical rites performed upon and after one's death, the experiences of the saints, and popular belief of a later origin inform Orthodoxy's conception of this intermediate state.

For instance, the "Trisagion for the Departed" in Greek churches and the "Panikhida" among the Russians is celebrated at the funeral, and then on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after death, each commemorating a component in the narrative of the afterlife.⁷⁵ The first three days are reserved for the acclimation of the soul to its separation from the body, which itself functions as a passive judgment to the extent that the departed was attached to earthly vanities. Between the third and ninth days, the soul is thought to gain passage through a series of toll houses, each occupied by an angel and demon who decide the state in which one will be situated before the final judgment based on one's collusion with the various vices. However, "[d]uring this passage," Louth observes, "the soul is assisted against the efforts of the demons not just by the angels of the toll houses, but also by its guardian angel, the prayers of the saints, and the prayers of those living on earth,"⁷⁶ which not only demonstrates the universality of the cosmos that we will elaborate on soon, but also reveals a compassionate disposition even during this intermediate state.

As less of a precise description of what will actually occur, "The passage of the toll houses represents, in a vivid way, what is required for someone to pass from the sin and temptations of this world . . . to the holy presence of God,"⁷⁷ and therefore narrates what is proper to one's preparation for the final judgment—the love and mercy of God. The remaining days up until the fortieth are spent visiting the abodes of the afterlife, about which very little is known or taught explicitly. Upon the completion of the forty days, the soul awaits the final judgment in its assigned state based on the accumulation of its passage through the toll houses and assistance from the angels and saints. Revealing again God's compassion during this life and in the next, Louth concludes, "The temporal dimension of the services may have more to do with the

75. See Louth, "Eschatology," 239–41.

76. *Ibid.*, 240.

77. *Ibid.*

temporal process of grieving and remembrance than with tracking the departed soul's progress in a state after death, about which little has been revealed to us save God's sure love and Christ's triumph over death in his resurrection."⁷⁸

The universal bodily resurrection at Christ's parousia is better suited to convey a compassionate eschatology. Much like the uniformity of the final judgment as divine mercy, "The resurrection itself," observes Vladimir Lossky, "will reveal the inner condition of beings, as bodies will allow the secrets of the soul to shine through."⁷⁹ This is because, as Louth informs us, "It is not just that we have souls *and* bodies, but rather that what we are, even our spiritual capacities, are bound up with our bodies."⁸⁰ The resurrected body, then, will function as a portrait of the ontological ascent of the Holy Mountain, i.e. theosis, during one's earthly life through the degree to which it shares "in the qualities of Christ's human body at the Transfiguration and after the Resurrection."⁸¹

Lossky expresses this notion of the bodily resurrection as both an implicit judgment on one's earthly preparation and the import of the Transfiguration: "At that time, everything which the soul has stored up in its inner treasure, will appear outwardly, in the body. All will become light, all will be penetrated by uncreated Light. The bodies of the saints will become like the glorious body of the Lord, as it appeared to the apostles on the day of the Transfiguration."⁸² In this sense, the bodily resurrection is a foretaste of how one will react to God's merciful love at the final judgment.

We now turn our attention to Christ's final judgment as mercy, which is the culmination of one's preparation in the earthly life. First, we recognize the parousia and final judgment as in some sense a single event. As Bulgakov observes, "[T]he parousia, the coming of Christ in glory, that is, in the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, is, as such, already the judgment."⁸³ This is the initial encounter with Christ's glory, mercy, and love—as love and truth in ontological fullness.

78. *Ibid.*, 241.

79. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 234.

80. Louth, "Eschatology," 244.

81. Ware, *Orthodox Way*, 136.

82. Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 235.

83. Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 455.

Moreover, although the parousia and final judgment are very real events, it is important to acknowledge also the “location” of one’s final destiny—heaven or hell—as being figurative. Bulgakov, for instance, maintains, “The eternal fire is not some place in creation but only a *state* of a certain part of creation.”⁸⁴ St. Isaac the Syrian likewise maintains that “[s]in, Gehenna, and Death do not exist at all with God, for they are effects, not substances.”⁸⁵ With respect to the popular conception of eternity, Bulgakov further avers, “[H]ere, one must first completely exclude the conception of eternity as time and temporality. Let us state more precisely that time and eternity are by no means related in the way that is usually postulated, because eternity is not a temporal but a *qualitative* determination.”⁸⁶ In like manner, Gregory of Nyssa gives an explanation of God’s pronouncement, “Here is a *place* beside me.”⁸⁷ “In speaking of ‘place,’” Gregory maintains, “he does not limit *the place* indicated by anything quantitative (for to something unquantitative there is no measure). On the contrary, by the use of the analogy of a measurable surface he leads the hearer to the unlimited and infinite.”⁸⁸

Gregory of Nyssa eventually asserts that this place is God himself, who, of course, is One;⁸⁹ it is here, in this one “place,” confronted with the fullness of his glory that all those who God created will be transfigured according to their need, ever increasing from glory to glory. God’s oneness intrinsically outlines the uniformity of his operations, of his essence, and of his final judgment, which therefore reveals the *content* of this uniform final judgment as merciful love universally offered. Evdokimov, for instance, observes, “God is eternally identical to himself. He is not the fearful Judge but he is Love and the very love which subjectively ‘becomes suffering among the outcasts and joy among the blessed.’”⁹⁰

The monadic, immutable, and ceaseless object of eschatological encounter is therefore the love and mercy of God, his glory which infuses the heavenly temple, and it is the subjective human reaction which engenders multiplicity or any division of experience. St. Isaac the Syrian

84. *Ibid.*, 502.

85. St. Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies*, “Homily 27,” 133.

86. Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 470.

87. *Vit. Moys.* 2.241: PG 405A–B. Exod 33:21.

88. *Ibid.*, 2.242: PG 405B.

89. *Ibid.*, 2.249: PG 408B–C.

90. Evdokimov, “Eschatology,” 27.

again wonderfully describes the operations of love at the final judgment: “I also maintain that those who are punished in Gehenna, are scourged by the scourge of love. . . . The power of love works in two ways: it torments sinners . . . [as] bitter regret. But love inebriates the souls of the sons of Heaven by its delectability.”⁹¹ Perhaps Fr. Thomas Hopko’s appraisal of Bulgakov on this matter can be considered, if not the definitive, at least a characteristically Orthodox eschatological instinct:

[I]t is precisely the presence of God’s mercy and love which cause the torment of the wicked. God does not punish; he forgives. . . . In a word, God has mercy on all, whether all like it or not. If we like it, it is paradise; if we do not, it is hell. Every knee will bend before the Lord. Everything will be subject to Him. God in Christ will indeed be “all and in all,” with boundless mercy and unconditional pardon. But not all will rejoice in God’s gift of forgiveness, and that choice will be judgment, the self-inflicted source of their sorrow and pain.⁹²

The variety in experience is not, however, a reflection of God’s transactions with humanity but of our own self-condemnation. This self-condemnation intimates that what one experiences in the next life is not a reflection of who God is and what his operations are, and this because his operation is singular, *viz.*, merciful love whose objective is the purification and restoration of the image of God in all humanity.⁹³ Self-condemnation, as the term itself implies, reflects the impurity of one’s soul upon her or his encounter with the singular operation of the indivisible and immutable Holy Trinity. “The judgment and separation,” Bulgakov observes, “consist in the fact that every human being will be placed before his own eternal image in Christ, that is, before Christ. And in the light of this image, he will see his own reality, and this comparison will be the judgment. It is this that is the Last Judgment of Christ upon every human being.”⁹⁴

St. Gregory of Nyssa also explains that “even if one says that painful retribution comes directly from God upon those who abuse their free will, it would only be reasonable to note that such sufferings have

91. St. Isaac, *Ascetical Homilies*, “Homily 28,” 141.

92. Fr. Thomas Hopko, “Foreword,” in Bulgakov, *Orthodox Church*, xiii.

93. *Vit. Moys.* 2.318: PG 429A.

94. Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 457.

their origin and cause in ourselves.”⁹⁵ When he writes about the plagues unleashed on the Egyptians, Gregory further warns his audience, “[L]et us not draw the conclusion that these distresses upon those who deserve them came directly from God, but rather let us observe that each man makes his own plagues when through his own free will he inclines toward these painful experiences.”⁹⁶ In like manner, St. Maximos the Confessor depicts the soul as analogous to either clay or wax, depending “upon its own will and purpose.” Under the same rays of “the Sun of righteousness,” every soul that “deliberately cleaves to the material world, hardens like clay and drives itself to destruction. . . . But every soul that cleaves to God is softened like wax and, receiving the impress and stamp of divine realities, it becomes ‘in spirit the dwelling-place of God.’”⁹⁷ St. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory’s elder brother, also notes the property of self-condemnation inherent to the episode of the three youths in the fiery furnace and those outside the furnace who felt its heat, concluding that “those worthy of the fire will feel its caustic quality and those worthy of the lighting will feel the illuminating property of the fire.”⁹⁸

In addition to the figures of the “stream of faith,”⁹⁹ the Red Sea,¹⁰⁰ and the episode of the water from the rock,¹⁰¹ the most striking image that Gregory cites to represent the future hope taught in eschatological monism, the presence of God for and in all, is light.¹⁰² For example, Gregory observes that during the plague of darkness which God had inflicted on Egypt, “the eyes of the Egyptians were not in darkness because some wall or mountain darkened their view and shadowed the rays, but the sun cast its rays on all equally. Whereas the Hebrews delighted in its light, the Egyptians were insensitive to its gift.”¹⁰³ Therefore, the light is uniform, but is again experienced diversely, not because of the quality or

95. *Vit. Moys.* 2.87: PG 352A–B.

96. *Ibid.*, 2.86: PG 349D–352A. Cf. 2.76: PG 348B–C.

97. St. Maximos the Confessor, “First Century (on Theology),” *Philokalia*, 2:116.

98. St. Basil of Caesarea, “Homily 13: On Psalm 28,” quoted in Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos, *Life After Death*, 257.

99. *Vit. Moys.* 2.66: PG 344D345A.

100. *Ibid.*, 2.126: PG 364B–C. Cf. 2.124: PG 361D.

101. *Ibid.*, 2.136: PG 368A. Cf. 2.244; 2.248: PG 405C–D; 408B. Cf. O’Connell, “Double Journey,” 319.

102. See, for instance, Denning-Bolle, “Mystical Flight,” 111f.

103. *Vit. Moys.* 2.81: PG 349B. Cf. 2.80: PG 349A–B.

composition of the light itself, but because of the subjective preparedness of the one encountering the light. The experience of this light *as* light is an indication of closer proximity to the archetype, Christ, of a higher altitude in one's ascent of the holy mountain and recalls the Transfiguration of Christ, typologically revealed when "Moses was transformed to such a degree of glory that the mortal eye could not behold him."¹⁰⁴

The mystery of the final judgment is compounded if we consider also the unity of humanity and the cosmos reflected in the communal nature of salvation and thus of the final judgment itself. As Christ's judgment is uniformly offered as merciful love, so is the *de facto* unity of humanity taken into account concurrently. It therefore first becomes imperative to acknowledge that the final judgment is universal. "This encounter with God," suggests Bulgakov, "this entering into the realm of the divine fire, is not something optional for human beings. It is inevitable."¹⁰⁵

The inevitable and universal final judgment is also absorbed by all humanity and the entire cosmos in unison. Because it is impossible to distinguish between the culpability of individuals due to the social and cosmic unity and interconnectedness of humanity, Orthodoxy teaches that each person is responsible for the sins of another. This concept is expressed wonderfully by Alyosha's starets, Fr. Zosima, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*:

Everything is like an ocean, everything flows and intermingles, you have only to touch in one place and it will reverberate in another part of the world. . . . Take yourself in hand, and be answerable for the sins of all men. My friend, this is actually true: you need only make yourself sincerely answerable for everything and everyone, and you will see immediately that it is really so, and that it is you who are actually guilty of the sins committed by each and every man."¹⁰⁶

Similarly, Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) comments on the "ontological unity of humanity"¹⁰⁷ in St. Silouan's teachings, averring that it is specifically "Christ-like love . . . [that] . . . makes all men ontologically one."¹⁰⁸

104. *Ibid.*, 2.217: PG 397C-D. Cf. Laird, "Darkness," 598.

105. Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 455.

106. Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 401.

107. Archimandrite Sophrony, *Silouan*, 222.

108. *Ibid.*, 123.

With the eschatological import of this teaching in mind, Bulgakov observes that “in discussing heaven and hell, one should remember that, although this judgment is personal, is rendered upon every person, it is also universal (‘all nations’), for Christ’s humanity is one, and the destiny of everyone is connected with the destiny of all; everyone is responsible for all.”¹⁰⁹ The unity of humanity and all the cosmos suggests that Christ’s uniform judgment of mercy is experienced as bliss by some and torment by others only in degree and extent, for even the sorrow that St. Silouan felt in the quote above for those experiencing torment in hell is in some sense suffered alongside eternal bliss. Archimandrite Sophrony, for whom St. Silouan was a spiritual father on Mount Athos, also describes the eschatological import of this cosmic unity that his Staretz taught, claiming that rather than interpreting “justice in the juridical sense, . . . Christian love speaks otherwise, seeing nothing strange but rather something natural in sharing the guilt of those we love. Indeed,” Sophrony continues, “it is only in this bearing of another’s guilt that the authenticity of love is made manifest and develops into full awareness of self.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, “every separate individual overcoming evil in himself inflicts such a defeat on cosmic evil that its consequences have a beneficial effect on the destinies of the whole world.”¹¹¹

To explain this phenomenon, St. Gregory of Nyssa appeals to the episode when “Moses armed the Levites against their fellow countrymen,” which resulted in “one thrust of the hand equally for everyone,” regardless of innocence or guilt. In Gregory’s spiritual interpretation:

It is like someone punishing a person caught in an evil act by whipping him. Whatever part of the body he may hit, he tears to shreds with the scourge, knowing that the pain inflicted on that part extends throughout the whole body. The same thing happens when the whole body united in evil is punished: The scourging inflicted on the part chastens the whole.¹¹²

This description reflects what John Sachs calls Gregory’s unique espousal of a “*communal* nature of salvation” which is “[c]entral to Gregory’s eschatological vision of a final and universal restoration in the

109. Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 477.

110. Archimandrite Sophrony, *Silouan*, 120.

111. *Ibid.*, 222.

112. *Vit. Moys.* 2.205: PG 393C. Cf. *Oratio Catechetica*, NPNF2 5:496.

good” where “the image of God . . . comes to its fullness or *pleroma* only in the human race as a whole.”¹¹³ Indeed, this unity of humanity and of the universal encounter with Christ’s judgment is reflected also in the intercession of the saints on behalf of all humanity, which is again how the Theotokos is depicted in icons of the final judgment.

The unity of humanity and the entire cosmos also gives cause to reflect more seriously on the *apokatastasis tōn pantōn*—the final restoration of all. The reason why Origen taught the final restoration of all was, as Louth explains, because “it is inconceivable that Christ is to remain in sorrow for all eternity, on account of the failure of any rational creature to respond to his love and to benefit from his sacrifice”¹¹⁴ Gregory also makes clear the temporality of Gehenna when he interprets the light after the three days of darkness that the Egyptians experienced as revealing “the final restoration (*apokatastasis*) which is expected to take place later in the kingdom of heaven of those who have suffered condemnation in Gehenna,”¹¹⁵ while the fires of Gehenna are for the purification of those who endure it.¹¹⁶

Gregory seems to have developed his teaching on *apokatastasis* more deliberately, in more detail, and in a more thoroughly Orthodox manner separate from the interpretations in the past that relied too heavily on Stoic and Plotinian Neoplatonist conceptions of humanity’s restoration to Goodness or Oneness.¹¹⁷ Such a “pretended *apokatastasis*” that envisaged the restoration of the spirits alone to their alleged pre-existent state is usually thought to be justly rejected at the fifth ecumenical council held in Constantinople in 553 CE,¹¹⁸ the same council that simultaneously affirmed and commended Gregory’s Orthodoxy. This is

113. Sachs, “Apocatastasis,” 637. See also Hart, “Vestigia Trinitatis,” 548f. and Ladner, “Philosophical Anthropology,” 82.

114. Louth, “Eschatology,” 245.

115. *Vit. Moys.* 2.82: PG 349B–C.

116. *Ibid.*, 2.84: PG 349D. For more on Gregory’s teaching on *apokatastasis*, see Andreopoulos, “Eschatology,” online: <http://www.theandros.com/restoration.html>; Barrois, “Gregory of Nyssa,” 7–16, esp. 14–16; Daley, *Hope*, 85–9; Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*; Sachs, “Apocatastasis,” 617–40, esp. 632–38; Tori, “Apokatastasis,” 87–100; and Tsirpanlis, “Gregory of Nyssa,” 41–56.

117. Sachs, “Apocatastasis,” 633.

118. See *NPNF2* 14:318. For alternative views, see Bulgakov, *Orthodox Church*, 185; Idem, *Lamb*, 482; and Daley, *Hope*, 84, 190. Cf. Barrois, “Gregory of Nyssa,” 8; and Sachs, “Apocatastasis,” 639f.

the case because Gregory's understanding of *apokatastasis* relies more on scriptural motifs and centres around an eschatological *hope* that is consistent with typical Orthodox discourse on the subject, and indeed with its life of prayer. What makes Gregory's espousal of the final restoration less objectionable are the contextual items that not only regulate his understanding but give it purpose and a content that is more consistent with typical Orthodox epistemological and eschatological discourse, while simultaneously ensuring the integrity of this mystery by avoiding over-analysis.

Bulgakov also notes, "From most ancient times doubts have existed as to the eternal duration of these torments; they are sometimes vied as a provisional pedagogic method of influencing the soul, and a final restoration is hoped for."¹¹⁹ More specifically, Fr. Andrew Louth notes Sts. Maximos the Confessor and Isaac the Syrian's reflection on the final restoration of all and lists Olivier Clément,¹²⁰ Metropolitan Kallistos Ware,¹²¹ and Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev¹²² as sympathetic to this teaching as well. However, in his seminal work, *The Orthodox Church*, Ware affirms the predominant perspective in Orthodoxy is a median position of *hope* and an intercessory and earnest *desire*, not as false hope but in confidence of the possibility that all will taste salvation: "It is heretical to say that all *must* be saved," and, I would submit, that some *must* be tormented without end, "for this is to deny free will; but," Ware continues, "it is legitimate to hope that all *may* be saved."¹²³ Evdokimov, also avers, "The Savior's plan, *that all be saved* (1 Tim 2:4; Rom 8:32) is infinitely more mysterious and *impenetrable* than predestination which is so human and so impoverished in its rectilinear logic. The 'complex of the elect' is a morbid state, symptomatic of an unhappy conscience, and anxiety about hell."¹²⁴

CONCLUSION

In Orthodox teaching, Christ's final judgment exhibits a compassionate eschatology, for it does not discriminate between those who need love

119. Bulgakov, *Orthodox Church*, 185.

120. Clément, *Mysticism*, 296–307.

121. Ware, "Salvation," 193–215.

122. Alfeyev, *Mystery*, 212–23.

123. Ware, *Orthodox Church*, 262.

124. Evdokimov, "Eschatology," 18. See also Bulgakov, *Lamb*, 482, 506.

and those who invite condemnation; it only adjudicates between those who need love and those who need *more* love, if it could be imagined for a brief moment that God could love inequitably. St. Gregory of Nyssa and some Orthodox theologians could envisage the *apokatastasis tōn pantōn* because the calibration of human culpability authorizes mercy to take precedence over retribution and because salvation is communal concurrent with the unity of humanity and the entire cosmos.

The *inevitability* and *ineluctability* of sin—of disobedience, sedition against God, a lack in virtue and purity, and an ontological distortion of the image of God—renders inconsistent any principle or ideology that encourages divine retribution or that adduces the expediency of avenging that which cannot be avoided. Therefore, instead of sentencing a portion of humanity to suffer eternal torments as punitive retribution and the remainder to their meritoriously earned heavenly reward, God's eschatological response to the inevitable mutability of his creation, exhibited in varying degrees of sinfulness, is uniformly one of merciful, therapeutic love. Just as it would be imprudent to exact vengeance on a human being suffering under an illness, the Great Physician in his co-suffering love and inherent mercy effectuates healing, which at times includes the pain of purification and a clearer consciousness but includes the hope of restoration and reconciliation with the Triune God. And with this, Evdokimov is given the final word:

[T]he God who seems unable to suffer nevertheless does suffer. God sees the sadness ahead, and his love is no less vigilant, because man is able to refuse him and build a whole life upon this rejection, upon an atheistic revolt against him. Which is more important, love or freedom? The two are infinite and hell bears this question in its fire.¹²⁵

125. *Ibid.*, 20.

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