

NOT KNOWING GOD IN ORDER TO SEE GOD

If you have ever been to London, England, you hopefully visited the Westminster Abbey. This is one of the few places for visitors that “doesn’t disappoint.” Originally constructed in the 11th century as a monastery (as it is still), it was founded by Edward the Confessor, whose remains still lie there in the front of the church. To give you a sense of time, Edward died the same year the battle of Hastings was fought (1066) and Britain became the home of the English. As you walk around, you discover that the Abbey is a veritable “Who’s Who” of kings, queens, statesmen, and poets. Below your feet are the graves of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Browning, Tennyson, T. S. Eliot, Lewis Carroll, D. H. Lawrence and George Frederick Handel—to name a few.

The main part of Westminster is the cathedral--an enormous basilica-style of Gothic architecture which leaves one with a breathtaking vision of height and depth of, if not God, at least of the worshippers’ concept of God. By the sheer amount of space involved between floor and soaring vaults, from the back of the nave to the altar, as well as by the complication of artistry upon every wall and window, you find yourself awed by everything that speaks of the unimaginable greatness of God. You have a peculiar sense that God is very present and yet not altogether accessible. This is not an unpleasant experience, on the contrary, you realize that your idea about God has probably been too domesticated and confined so that you may grasp the Almighty.

We might, therefore, refer to such an experience as mystical, although this term is commonly associated in the Western mind as highly subjective and esoteric understanding that is for only the few. This is, however, a stunted definition. In ancient Christian theology, the *mystical* is the wonder of the Christian mystery, the fulfilling of the Father’s plan of

redemption in Christ, to which Paul refers as the “mystery” (I Tim 3: 16). But the word mystery also applied to a number of central things in our worship of God. Ambrose of Milan declared that **our very faith, is the mystery of the Trinity**;¹ as is the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist and the Mystery of our Lord’s Baptism, and so our own baptism.² Those preparing for baptism and being introduced to the teachings of the deeper mystery. Finally, John Cassian describes one kind of interpreting the Bible as “spiritual mysteries” (Conf 14. 8); the idea being that Scripture too contains the Mystery in the form of words, describing the works of God that are disclosed to human minds only by grace. Because God himself is Mystery, we should expect to find throughout the divine text, depths and hidden realities that exceed our knowledge. None of these mysteries should be regarded as problems. The distance that exists between creature and Creator is not something to be overcome or removed as if it were an obstacle to one’s growth in the Christian life.

For the next few minutes, I want to introduce you to the ways in which early Greek Christianity (roughly 4-5th centuries) thought about spirituality and which contended that if we take the eternal being of God seriously, it may be that moving more deeply into His incomprehensible Life is not brighter or more knowable. In fact, some early Christian thinkers have proposed that the way of spirituality and achieving virtue comes by entering into a wonderful darkness that is everlasting and infinite. Paradoxically, only as the darkness grows will our knowledge and quest for virtue develop.

To begin, I would like to consider the precarious and carefully limited role which knowing God and knowledge of God has had since the beginning of the Church. Christians

¹ Praef. Luke’s Gospel.

² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 39. praef.

seem caught in a cross-fire between the God who is incomprehensible and the God who has revealed Himself through the soul, the natural world, Holy Scripture and most of all in the Incarnate Christ. On one hand, the Apostle Paul prays for believers **that the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better** (Col 1:10; cf. Eph 1:17). Likewise, the Gospel of John places a very strong emphasis on how Christ reveals the Father; **that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father** (10: 38). **No one has ever seen God**, says the introduction to the Gospel, **[but] the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known** (Jn 1: 18). [when you have free time try and count all the occurrences of the verb to know in John).

At the same time, the Church has always recited the words of the Psalmist, **Your knowledge is too high for me** (Ps 139; cf. Job 36: 26), and Paul again, **Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord?** (Rom 11: 33-34).

Like many important points of theology, the knowledge of God and the unknowable God necessarily produced a balancing act that historic Christianity has sought to preserve. We can observe this balancing at work when the early church ultimately rejected the many types of Gnosticism. As the name implies, first and second-century Gnostic Christianity claimed 1) that the path to salvation was knowledge; 2) an arcane knowledge that the individual could discover through arcane methods. So the Gospel of Thomas presents Jesus saying, **It is to those who are worthy of mysteries that I tell mysteries** (2: 2). As far as it can be determined, Gnostic Christianity was organized not as churches, but by what we

might call “small study groups.” Here believers could find a deeper spirituality by receiving further *gnosis* about the self, the world and God.

That Gnostic Christianity presented a serious, widespread threat to catholic (mainstream) Christianity, there is no doubt. Almost all of the ancient writers from this period—Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus--refute one or more types of Gnosticism. Certainly there was an attraction to Gnosticism’s claim to special insight, however, most forms of Gnostic Christianity were disappearing as a religious force from the Mediterranean world by the early third century. There were a number of reasons for this, but certainly a weakness of Gnosticism was its insistence on linking soteriology and epistemology, that is, salvation depended on knowing of a very particular kind. Such revelation of rationality diminished the primary place of faith. It could also only cater to the elect few, which may have the reason for its ultimate downfall.

Ever since the third century, Christianity has struggled to avoid what Jarsolav Pelikan called a “tyranny of epistemology”³ in its understanding of God and God’s revelation to us. Simply put, the “tyranny” occurs when Christians think of God as a great field of investigation which they do not know very well but are seeking to remedy this problem. The Syriac poet from the fourth century, Ephraem, speaks to this struggle when he wrote:

Let us not allow ourselves to go astray
and to study our God.
Let us take the measure of our mind,
and gauge our thinking.
And as for our knowledge, let us know how small it is, and
Too contemptible to scrutinize the Knower of all.

In a fascinating, little known book, entitled the *Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa attempts to present an anatomy of Christian spirituality, which he says, is paradoxically a

³ J. Pelikan, “The Tyranny of Epistemology . . . “ *Encounter* 18 (1957), 53-6.

movement from light to darkness. Gregory was very aware of those in his day who claimed to have a rational knowledge about God that violated the very essence of God. Such people asserted that if you know God's names, you can intellectually grasp the Divine. In response Gregory writes "how can our mind, which always operates on a dimensional image, comprehend a nature that has no dimension."⁴ But let me first tell you some things about this Gregory since there are many Gregories in early Church history.

He was, what we would call, a "late-bloomer." Coming from a strong, even famous, Christian family, His older brother was Basil of Caesarea, already established as a great theologian, and bishop. Macrina, his older sister, was a highly regarded female ascetic, and she founded monastery for women in Cappadocia. Gregory was never formally educated at schools in Alexandria or Athens such as Basil had done. He was, nevertheless, schooled in the Bible and liberal arts, got married, and taught rhetoric, and had no intention of becoming a bishop. Things were not so simple, however. Gregory had grown up in the second half of the fourth century when the conflicts over the Trinity were at their height. In A.D. 379, his brother Basil convinced him to return to Cappadocia and become bishop of tiny town called Nyssa. Gregory initially resented his brother for doing this to him. Nyssa was a remote place, an ancient version of Crocodile Dundee's "Walk-About Creek."

For the rest of his life he remained the bishop of Nyssa and made some appearances in Constantinople to assist in battling heretical views, but he is best known for his refutations against anti-Nicene proponents and writing numerous scripture commentaries. In effect, his book, *The Life of Moses*, is a commentary on Exodus 1-20, with special focus on how Moses was changed from Egyptian secular ruler to God's exemplar of virtue. And yet, this work is more than a commentary since Moses is being offered as a model on how one follows after

⁴ *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, sermon 7. 44

virtue. Like many of his era, Gregory fully embraced the notion that the only way to the virtuous life was by imitating great holy men in the Old Testament or in the Christian past. The stages in Moses' life that led him to the top of Mt Sinai was, for Gregory, a blueprint of how the soul was mystically transformed into the likeness of God. This meant "beautifying one's own soul with what is incorruptible, unchangeable and shares in no evil at all." (II. 318).

As Moses went through stages in his ascent to God, so must we. The first stage is for beginner Christians, which Gregory calls the way of light. This involves our detachment from the love of "things" and the purification of the soul. One of the hallmarks of early Christian spirituality is that they took the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 very seriously, especially the one that says: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." I'll come back to this point in a moment. Only by purifying ourselves can we become recipients of Divine knowledge. His expression may be foreign to us, but we would do well to think of acquiring knowledge, not through purely rational means, but by making ourselves a worthy receptacle that can hold such knowledge. This principle, we are told, explains why God told the Israelites to wash their clothes before ascending Sinai (Ex 19: 10).

The second stage is one of illumination, characterized by an awareness of moving from the sensible to invisible realities. One would think that Gregory means progression to greater clarity; however, this is the stage of Moses' journey when he entered the cloud. If you have ever been in a thick fog, you'll know it dampens all sights and sounds around you. It is the cloud which blocks out all outward appearances which compels and accustoms the soul to look within. Herein the image of God is to be found and thereby a knowledge of

God. But we must not confuse this knowledge of God with a knowledge of God as He is. There is only an awareness of God's presence.

In the third stage, Ex. 20: 21 says that Moses entered the darkness and saw God in it. What can this mean? In Gregory's words, "Moses' vision of God began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses climbed higher and became more perfected, he saw God in the darkness." Drawing on the language of paradox, Moses is said to have seen God, but not seen with his eyes "because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility like a kind of darkness" (II. 163). In other words, God cannot be seen by virtue of who He is, as John 1:18 stated, "No one has ever seen God." The term "darkness" takes on a new meaning as not mere darkness, but the kind of darkness you experience when you go deep down into the ocean or high enough that you leave the atmosphere. This darkness expresses that the divine nature or essence remains inaccessible because God is infinite; that is, there is no bottom or end of his Being. It should be obvious then that no finite mind can plumb the depths of God. As Gregory puts it, "How can one arrive at the boundary sought for when there is no boundary?" (I. 8). This is the kind of effect which the Westminster Abbey is supposed to have on the worshipper; that God is an immeasurable vastness and the usual way of knowing things about God just don't apply.

Here is where Gregory of Nyssa makes his most noteworthy contribution to Christian theology, namely, that Christian the life must first be defined by seeking God without end, and "that true satisfaction of the soul's desire consists in constantly going on with this quest and never ceasing in the ascent to God." This is a joyful conclusion, since it assures that one can always progress in holiness because spiritual progress is one of infinite growth. Whereas

for the Platonist, all change is regarded as a defect or a loss, but in Gregory's system, the process of changing may be redeemed by perpetual growth in good (or in the Good). It is this sort of movement which describes our transformation: **from glory to glory** (II Cor 3. 18). However much the Christian is transformed into the likeness of God, God remains ever beyond, so that the soul must always push forward in anticipation in this life and in the one to come.

How then is this last stage of darkness useful for developing virtue? The discovery that drawing nearer to God is a movement into eternal darkness might not be very good news, in fact, it may be terrifying. There are two approaches to pursuing virtue that we can take following the example of Moses' quest. The first is the one which relates to the Divine Being. Moses learns of the things that must be known about God—namely, that none of the things known by human comprehension can be ascribed to Him. Theologians call this kind of knowledge, “apophatic theology.” Our knowing consists of what **God is not**. There is a definite apophatic character to Greek patristic thought then went back to Origen in the 3rd century. One certainty of an authentic knowledge of God is how imperfectly we know Him.

The other side of virtue is learning what we must do to pursue the virtuous life. It begins by emulating those God used to fulfill his purposes of good. This notion, of course, dates back to Plato, Aristotle and Plutarch, who wrote many “Lives” of great men that were worthy of our admiration and therefore of our imitation. In this same vein, the Roman Stoic philosopher, Seneca, wrote, “Plato, Aristotle and the whole throng of sages . . . derived more benefit from the character of Socrates than from his words.”⁵ A similar emphasis is found in the Bible: Job is an example of “steadfastness” (Jam 5. 11), Abraham the model of faith

⁵ Epistle 66.

(Heb 11. 18); Jesus sometimes end his parables with the words, “Go and do likewise (cf Lk 10. 37); Paul encouraged the Corinthian Christians “be imitators of me” (I Cor 4. 16). We likewise find this pattern expressed in the early Church as found in texts such as the *Life of Cyprian* and especially the famous *Life of Antony*. You can’t teach virtue by words. As Palladius wrote at the beginning of his history about distinguished men and women ascetics, “Teaching consists of virtuous acts of conduct: cheerfulness, courageousness, bravery, goodness . . . which generates words like a flame of fire.”⁶ There was nothing at all abstract about virtue, being found in living examples. Only in this way can we begin the task of moral instruction and spiritual progress.

One end result—perhaps itself a virtue, is that of seeing God. Again we remember the Beatitude, **Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God**. Just as the twin-notions of knowing God and the unknowable God cannot be separated, we find the same paradox here. Christians are destined to see God Who cannot be seen. At one point in Exodus, God says to Moses, No one can see me and live (Ex 33. 20). Mystical understanding works like this: it’s always a mixture of knowledge and ignorance, possession and quest, immanence and transcendence.⁷ Based on what I’ve discussed thus far, how is it possible to **see God**? Again we turn to Gregory who speaks of Moses at the top of Mt Sinai: “his eyes sharply penetrated the divine darkness and in this way, he was able to contemplate the invisible.”⁸ The Divine darkness is not a blackness as if we stumbled into an underground room with no lights. This darkness is a positive reality that helps us discover God, and hence is called luminous. Although it sounds like a contradiction in terms, a

⁶ The Lausiac History I. 2.

⁷ Daniélou, 56.

⁸ Comm on the Ps.

luminous darkness is one which is filled with God's presence, and by faith can the soul begin to perceive the darkness. In fact, the closer God comes to the soul, the more intense the darkness becomes. And it is then, with all other things of this world cleared away, that true vision God occurs: that the soul looks up to Him and never ceases to desire Him. Notice that the emphasis in this kind of spirituality falls on "seeing" rather than "knowing."

What we discover, in the end, is that the intellect in itself can never lead anyone to the virtues of the soul. Mere knowledge—even about God—does not provide growth or movement toward sharing in the life of God. Some scholars have suggested that Protestantism is built on a Gnostic scheme of a knowledge that saves.⁹ This is too extreme. And yet, given its special emphasis on knowing God and God's revelation in a very cognitive sense suggests Christian spirituality is too closely tied to an epistemological framework as if one were studying physics or physical education.¹⁰ Balance between knowledge of God and the unknowable God must be preserved, **lest we re-make God in our own image and according to our conceptions.** Gregory's warning to Christians of his time is a timeless wisdom: when we question God in terms of his being, then it is time to keep silence; when it is a question of what God does (operations), then it's time to speak and use words to tell of His deeds.¹¹

Ancient writers like Gregory remind us that the door to joyful mystery must be opened. Knowledge, even the knowledge that comes from Scripture, is not undermined but humbled, as it is situated before the vast depths of God. Because God is eternal and infinite,

⁹ Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (Oxford, 1987), espec. 55ff.

¹⁰ It has been plausibly argued that American Protestantism, given its hospitality to the European Enlightenment, "too often forgot the transcendence essential to any worthwhile God." Mark Noll, "The Rise and Long Life of the Protestant Enlightenment in America," *Knowledge and Belief in America*, 120

¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Comm. on Ecclesiastes*, sermon 7. 44

there will never come a time when we've exhausted all that God has to give us; we'll never plumb the depths of the Almighty, always going deeper in and higher up.