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Pessimism and Hope in Gregory of Nazianzus' Theological Heritage

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Abstract: The theological virtue of hope has been a subject of profound reflection in the Christian tradition, particularly for its role in spiritual life and the human journey toward God. While Gregory of Nazianzus' (329–390) contributions to Trinitarian theology and Christology have been extensively studied, his understanding of hope as an integral element of spiritual life has not yet received adequate systematic attention. This article addresses this research gap through a hermeneutical analysis of Gregory's theological legacy. Although his works do not contain a systematic teaching on hope, the study demonstrates how Gregory's spiritual experience transforms into a profound theological vision of hope. The article proceeds in three stages: first examining Gregory's personal experience and its influence on his theological thinking, then analyzing his poetic works that describe existential experiences of pessimism, and finally exploring the theological foundation of his concept of hope through his anthropological teaching. The research reveals that Gregory develops an "anthropology of hope" where human existence, though marked by struggle and suffering, finds its ultimate meaning in the calling to theosis. By examining the dialectical tension between pessimism and divine aspiration in Gregory's poetry, this study shows how he articulates hope not as mere optimism, but as a dynamic reality grounded in the experience of God's presence and God's promises.

Keywords: hope, Christian vocation, divine image, Gregory of Nazianzus, pessimism, spiritual experience, theological anthropology, theosis

In the history of Christian thought, hope occupies a distinctive place as it reveals the profound dimension of spiritual life and divine knowledge. Since the early centuries of the Church, prominent theologians and thinkers have sought to comprehend this fundamental Christian virtue that enables one to remain free and oriented toward God even amid life's most challenging circumstances. Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), one of the most profound Christian thinkers, holds a special place in the theological understanding of hope. Although his theological legacy does not contain a separate systematic teaching on hope, his entire corpus is imbued with its lived experience. While Gregory's work has been extensively studied in terms of Trinitarian theology and Christology, his understanding of hope as an integral element of spiritual life has not yet received adequate systematic scholarly attention. This study aims to address this research gap through an analysis of the concept of hope in Gregory's theological heritage.

In Gregory's works, hope emerges as an integral element of spiritual life that organically unites theological knowledge, mystical experience, and the path to

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deification. The uniqueness of his approach lies in treating hope not merely as one of the theological virtues but as humanity's special calling, which unfolds through the dialectical tension between the experience of spiritual oppression and the aspiration for deification. Through analysis of Gregory's key texts, particularly his poetic legacy, we will trace how the author, drawing upon theological reflection and personal spiritual experience, develops a profound understanding of hope as a dynamic force leading humanity toward its ultimate purpose.

A distinctive feature of our research is the attention to the interrelation between the author's personal experience and his theological thought. Methodologically, the study employs a hermeneutical analysis of texts in their historical context, with particular focus on the connection between the author's personal experience and his theological reflection. The research proceeds in three stages: (1) contextual analysis of Gregory's personal experience and its influence on his theological thinking; (2) analysis of his poetic works describing existential experiences of pessimism and doubt; (3) systematic analysis of Gregory's anthropological teaching to reveal the theological foundation of his concept of hope. This structure allows us to trace how the author's personal experience transforms into theological teaching about hope as an essential element of spiritual life.

Gregory's theological legacy is particularly valuable for its organic integration of different facets of Christian experience: the aspiration for contemplative life and active pastoral ministry, deep sensitivity to human suffering and unwavering faith in God's love, awareness of the drama of human fallenness and boundless trust in divine mercy. The primary sources for this study are Gregory's corpus of Orations, which reveals the dogmatic and pastoral aspects of his teaching, and his poetic heritage, which contains unique testimonies of the author's spiritual experience. Special attention is given to his poetic works because in them, unlike his contemporaries, Gregory openly describes his personal experience of faith, struggle, and doubt, thereby creating a living context for understanding his concept of hope.

1. Distinctive Characteristics of Gregory the Theologian's Personality

Among the pantheon of patristic writers, Gregory the Theologian stands uniquely distinguished in scholarly estimation as "the most eminent poet of his era"[1] and notably as "the sole poet among the great Cappadocian Fathers." (Trypanis 1990, 48)

1 This foundational assessment is supported by multiple scholars (Trypanis 1990, 48; Pellegrino 1932, 107; von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1905, 210). Professor Thomáš Špidlík (1992, 13), referencing Plato's Phaedrus, emphasizes that theology is especially reserved for poets.

The corpus of his poetic works, composed primarily during his final years in the contemplative solitude of his ancestral estate following an intensive period of pastoral ministry[2] represents the culmination of his literary artistry, theological insight, spiritual wisdom, and life experience.

The distinctive quality of Gregory's poetry lies in its remarkable authenticity and self-disclosure, achieving what scholars recognize as an unprecedented level of personal expression in ancient Greek literature (cf. Otis 1961, 160). His verses serve as both a historical testament and an intimate chronicle, documenting not only his contemporary epoch but also his internal spiritual journey. This self-revelatory approach marked a significant departure from both pagan and Christian literary conventions of his time. As Herbert Musurillo astutely observes, "with the exception of Augustine, no other Father of the Church reveals so much of his own interior longings, his doubts, and his anxieties." (1970, 46) This candor finds its fullest expression in his expansive verse *Autobiography* (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 11 [White 1996, 11–153]), composed in his later years, where he provides a detailed account of pivotal life events interwoven with a profound personal reflection and interpretation. This work, composed during a period of significant personal disillusionment, resonates with deep melancholy born of multiple sources.

The primary wellspring of Gregory's dejection emerged from the tumultuous ecclesiastical and historical circumstances he encountered.[3] Our author witnessed the empire's decline through the successive reigns of Constantius, Julian, Jovian, Valentinian, Valens, and Gratian (cf. Trisoglio 1999, 16–44), while simultaneously engaging in intense theological controversies in defense of the orthodox faith (see Norris 1991, 53–71).

Compounding these broader historical challenges were deeply personal trials: his life trajectory became marked by a succession of disappointments, setbacks, and ordeals. Over a decade, Gregory lost all those he loved and cherished: the death of his brother Caesarius was the first in a series of losses, followed by the death of his sister Gorgonia, the nearly simultaneous deaths of his parents, and finally, the death of his close friend Basil. Gregory ultimately faced the painful task of publicly expressing grief for these beloved people.[4] Perhaps most poignantly, Gregory experienced the

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2 John McGuckin's comprehensive analysis challenges the traditional view of Gregory's poetic chronology. Drawing on detailed textual evidence, he demonstrates that Gregory composed poetry throughout his life rather than exclusively in his final decade (cf. McGuckin 2006, 202–3).

3 Francesco Trisoglio provides a penetrating analysis of how historical circumstances shaped Gregory's poetic vision: "The turbulent historical period, profound ecclesiastical changes, sorrowful personal experiences, a sensitivity prone to anxiety, and the aspiration toward absolute perfection which could never leave him satisfied, explain this background of melancholy that forms the substance of his poetic corpus." (1996, 99)

4 Gregory's cycle of Funeral Orations represents a unique corpus in patristic literature, comprising *Oration* 7, "On the Death of His Brother Caesarius"; *Oration* 8, "On the Death of His Sister Gorgonia"; *Oration* 18, "On the Death of His Father Gregory the Elder"; and *Oration* 43, "On the Death of Basil."

acute pain of perceived betrayal by his closest friends. His relationship with Basil the Great,[5] who prioritized ecclesiastical necessity over personal bonds, provides the most striking example. Basil's decision to consecrate Gregory as bishop, despite knowing his friend's contemplative inclinations, created a wound that remained unhealed even after fifteen years. Gregory's raw emotional response echoes in his later writing: "So what happened to you? How could you cast me off so suddenly?[6] May the kind of friendship which treats its friends in such a way be banished from this life. We were lions yesterday but today I am an ape. But to you even a lion is of little worth." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 11, 221–35 [White 1996, 41]) This unvarnished expression of hurt exemplifies Gregory's commitment to emotional authenticity in his written work.

A further dimension of the pessimistic undertone pervading the Saint's poetry can be traced to his melancholic and sensitive temperament. Throughout his life, Gregory repeatedly confronted a profound dichotomy: the call to monastic solitude versus the demands of public ecclesiastical ministry. This fundamental tension became the defining paradigm of his entire life. Brooks Otis astutely characterized Gregory's internal struggle as an ongoing dialectic between "throne and mountain."[7] In his heart's deepest recesses, Gregory perpetually yearned for the radical ascetic life, removed from secular concerns and intrigues, where, like Moses or Elijah, he might ascend the mountain and contemplate the Divine presence in the cloud (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 27,9 [Norris 1991, 222–23]). This inclination aligned naturally with his contemplative, melancholic, and often hesitant disposition. Yet paradoxically, Gregory possessed exceptional qualities that suited him for ecclesiastical leadership, doctrinal defense, and proclamation of the orthodox faith: nurtured in the orthodox tradition, he received the finest classical education available, excelled as a rhetorician and intellectual, and ultimately emerged as one of Christianity's most

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5 Gregory's description of his friendship with Basil represents one of the most moving accounts of spiritual friendship in patristic literature: "God granted me this favour too: he took me and attached me to the wisest man, the only person, in his life and thought, superior to all. . . . Who was this man? No doubt you will easily recognise him. It was Basil, the great benefactor of our age. With him I shared my studies, my lodgings and my thoughts. And if I might boast a little, we formed a pair famous throughout Greece. All things we held in common and one soul united our two separate bodies. What particularly brought us together was this: God and a desire for higher things. For from the moment we achieved such a degree of confidence that we divulged to each other even the deep secrets of our hearts, we were bound together all the more closely by our longing, for shared ideals are a strong incentive to close friendship." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 11, 221–35 [White 1996, 27])

6 The matter concerns the diocese of Sasima, to which Gregory was ordained by Basil. The Sasima incident represents a crucial turning point in Gregory's life. This remote and desolate diocese, to which Basil appointed him, became a symbol of the tension between ecclesiastical duty and contemplative vocation (cf. Ruether 1969, 40).

7 The metaphorical contrast between "throne" and "mountain" encapsulates a central tension in Gregory's life and thought. The "throne" represents ecclesiastical office with its attendant public duties, while the "mountain" symbolizes contemplative solitude and spiritual ascent (cf. Otis 1961, 146–65).

profound theological minds (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 11, 280–299 [White 1996, 31–33]).

Gregory recognized that embracing the "throne" would immerse him in worldly affairs and ecclesiastical politics, entangling him in struggles for temporal prestige that he never sought,[8] while choosing the "mountain"—pursuing an austere ascetic life focused solely on inner cultivation—would preclude his ability to serve the broader Christian community (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 11, 308–9 [White 1996, 33]). He ultimately philosophically pursued a middle path, attempting to harmonize contemplative depth with pastoral service: "I chose a middle path between solitude and involvement, adopting the meditative ways of the one, the usefulness of the other." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 11, 310 [White 1996, 33]) Yet this resolution failed to fully reconcile his fundamental antinomy,[9] as he spent his life longing for solitude amid the world, while his thoughts turned to the world in solitude.

This characteristic hesitancy often became a source of profound suffering, particularly when others imposed life-altering decisions upon him. Gregory would later characterize these impositions as acts of tyranny perpetrated against his will. The first such "tyranny" was his priestly ordination on Christmas 361, performed by his father Gregory the Elder. In 372, he endured an even more dramatic upheaval that once again disrupted the foundations of his existence (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 12, 4 [PG 35, 847]). This was his episcopal consecration, executed by his closest friend Basil in conjunction with Gregory's father, to the see of Sasima—a diocese he would never actually visit: "I was in no way committed to the church entrusted to me—to the extent that I did not offer a single sacrifice to God or join the congregation in prayer; neither did I ordain even one priest." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 11, 530–533 [White 1996, 49–51])

Gregory's poetic works resonate deeply with readers who often recognize their own experiences and emotional struggles in his verses (cf. Rapisarda 1953, 200). Far from presenting an idealized spiritual journey, his life narrative reveals a path marked by dramatic tensions and apparent failures, which he candidly acknowledged through expressions of dissatisfaction, disappointment, melancholy, and periodic despair. Gregory's profound humanity manifests itself in his experience of depression, physical and spiritual pain, doubts, lamentations, righteous indignation, and even fear of death.

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8 Gregory often mentions this in his letters as well, particularly in his letter to Eudoxius (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Epistola* 178, 10 [Storin 2019, 125]).

9 This internal conflict was profoundly shaped by Platonic philosophy, which identified matter as the source of all evil while ascribing unique authentic value to the spiritual domain. This philosophical foundation contributed to the early Christian conception of opposition and enmity between body and soul, between terrestrial and celestial realms (cf. Pinault 1925, 45–57; Moreschini 1974, 1347–92).

2. The Pessimistic Realism of a Christian

The most profound wellspring of melancholy and existential gravity pervading Gregory the Theologian's poetic corpus emerges from his penetrating insight into human nature. Throughout his works, Gregory repeatedly engages with fundamental questions of human existence—its telos, its struggles, and its suffering. It is within this anthropological framework that his characteristic "pessimistic realism"[10] finds its most articulate expression, not merely as a personal disposition but as an inherent dimension of the human condition.

Gregory's understanding was shaped by a dual experience. Primary among these was his pastoral ministry, which provided immediate encounter with human reality in all its sorrows and tribulations, giving rise to the recurring motifs of pessimistic realism and metaphysical melancholy (cf. Fleury 1930, 346) that permeate his writings. Through direct pastoral engagement, Gregory repeatedly confronted the profound truth that "human nature inclines toward evil and resists the good," (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 2,12 [PG 35, 421]) observing how the human intellect becomes clouded by destructive thoughts and distances itself from virtue (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 2, 7 [PG 37, 1531–77]). Significantly, these insights emerged not from theoretical study but from daily pastoral encounters, where individual experience continuously illuminated universal truth, and universal truth found confirmation in particular experience.

The second formative influence was Gregory's own interior life—the sustained spiritual struggle that characterized his entire existence. This personal ascetic journey provided him with unique insight into both the profound depths of humanity's fallen condition and the sublime heights of its divine vocation: though "everything here is trouble for us mortals," (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 16, 22 [Gilbert 2001, 146]) but "leaving the earth, man might journey from here to God, as god." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 1, 8, 99 [Gilbert 2001, 66]) His theological reflection is characterized by an acute awareness of this spiritual dynamism: the constant cycle of falling and rising, the ceaseless movement toward divine reality. Through his own life experience, Gregory witnessed the mutability and inconstancy of human nature, a wisdom he preserved for subsequent generations in his works.

Self-knowledge emerges as the foundational principle permeating Gregory the Theologian's poetic corpus, manifest in his recurring existential inquiries: "Who am I? Who was I, and who shall I become?" (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 15, 1 [Gilbert 2001, 138]) While this pursuit of self-knowledge was already well-established in both classical philosophy[11] and Christian tradition, Gregory's contribution

10 Trisoglio's analysis of Gregory's "pessimistic realism" finds a theological parallel in Karl Rahner's treatment of Christian hope (cf. Trisoglio 1996, 99; Rahner 1978, 514–15).

11 The Delphic maxim "Know thyself" (γνώθι σεαυτόν) becomes in Gregory's thought a foundation for both spiritual development and theological reflection.

transcends mere exhortation to self-examination. Instead, he offers an intimate chronicle of his own journey toward self-understanding, one where questions often remain deliberately unresolved, particularly when confronting the profound mysteries of human suffering and the depths of evil inherent in the human condition.

This approach finds its most eloquent expression in his masterwork *On Human Nature* (*Carm.* I, 2, 14 [Gilbert 2001, 132–37]), where personal introspection becomes the lens through which universal human experience is examined. This poem stands as a cornerstone of Gregory's anthropological thought, where theological anthropology emerges not from abstract speculation but from lived experience. Here, fundamental questions of existence resonate with particular urgency:

> Who was I? Who am I? What shall I be? I don't know clearly. Nor can I find one better stocked with wisdom. But, as through thick fog, I wander every which way, with nothing, not a dream, of the things I long for. For all of us are groundlings, vagabonds, over whom the swart cloud of the fat flesh hangs. But wiser than me is he who, beyond others, expelled from his heart its ready-spoken lie. I am. Think: what does this mean? Something of me's gone by, something I'm now completing, another thing I'll be, if I will be. Nothing's for sure. I am, indeed, a troubled river's current, always in transit, having nothing fixed. Which of these, then, will you say that I am? (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 14, 17–28 [Gilbert 2001, 132–33])

Significantly, these questions are directed not toward divine revelation but toward human reflection. Their purpose is not to demand definitive answers or to raise reproach against God, but to invite deeper contemplation of Divine Providence and a more profound understanding of God's redemptive plan for humanity (cf. Trisoglio 1997, 326). Gregory eschews facile optimism, instead advocating for an unflinching acceptance of reality in all its severity, including its bitterness, sorrow, and mortality. He resists any temptation to present human existence through an artificially optimistic lens.

In his meditation on human destiny, Gregory repeatedly confronts the weight of an existential dualism that generates profound internal conflict: on one side lies temporal reality, perpetually disturbed by discord and apparent meaninglessness; on the other, the soul's yearning for God and eternal beatitude. The former represents our inescapable daily reality, while the latter points toward an eschatological horizon that both attracts and intimidates with its uncertainty (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Epistola* 80 [Storin 2019, 132]). This creates a persistent tension between faith and experiential reality. Gregory deeply experienced this dualism in his life, locating the primary source of human spiritual struggle in the dual nature of the unified human person: "For, in truth, I am two-fold: the body was formed down here, and, again, it, therefore, nods down towards this ground. But the soul is a breath of God, and always yearns exceedingly for a greater share of the things of heaven above." (Gregorius

Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 15, 149–52 [Gilbert 2001, 143–44]) However, despite this internal struggle, the thinker believes that reconciliation between these two "adversaries" is possible (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 14, 58–63 [Gilbert 2001, 134]), as humans are integral beings and the body is not the soul's enemy.

Gregory's existential anguish occasionally reaches profound depths of expression: "What is life? I've leaped from one tomb, I go to another, and after that tomb, I'll be buried in fire, uncared for. . . . I'll venture to make this true assertion: that man therefore is God's toy." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 15, 133–42 [Gilbert 2001, 143]) In this vision, human existence becomes an arena of perpetual suffering, where "everything here is trouble for us mortals. All's laughter, powder, shadows, illusions, dew, a breath, a wing, a puff, a dream, a wave's heave, a river's flow, a schooner's trail, a breeze, fine dust, a still-rolling circle, turning all alike, . . . for hours, days, nights, with pains, deaths, sufferings and pleasures, in illnesses, mishaps, triumphs." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 16, 22–28 [Gilbert 2001, 146])[12] This perspective inevitably raises the question: How could a Christian theologian, a Father of the Church, perceive existence through such an apparently hopeless lens? The persistent internal conflicts, the raw drama of human existence, the quest for meaning particularly amid unrelenting suffering, and ultimately death itself, against which all arguments prove futile—these themes pervade the Theologian's poetry, oppressing the reader with their apparent irresolution: "on both sides there's a precipice; what then shall we do?" (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 13, 11 [Gilbert 2001, 131])

Gregory holds the distinction of introducing into Christian poetry a new emotional register—a distinctive melancholy that occasionally borders on pessimism and transforms into what might be termed "metaphysical sadness" (cf. Viscanti 1987, 121). Yet his melancholic sensibility, while pervasive throughout his poetic works, differs fundamentally from the despair found in classical Greek writers—Euripides, Sophocles, Homer—whose characters, overwhelmed by despair, find no meaning in existence and must ultimately surrender to fate's arbitrary will (cf. Fleury 1930, 345). Gregory's sadness might better be characterized as illuminated melancholy, fundamentally distinct from the morbid spiritual lethargy that afflicted many of his contemporaries.

While this persistent melancholic strain has led some scholars to diagnose Gregory retrospectively as psychologically depressed (cf. Rapisarda 1953, 190), a deeper engagement with his corpus reveals something more profound: not mere depression, but an extraordinary sensitivity to human nature's alienation from its Creator. Moreover, his pessimistic moods must be understood within their rhetorical context,

12 Gregory expresses similar bitter despair in his letter to Philagrius: "My body is in bad shape, and old age shows upon my head. I have a combination of anxieties: there are raids into my business, I have no trust in my friends, and the church is without a shepherd. Virtues bid me farewell, vices are laid bare; I am a ship in the night, nowhere is there a beacon—Christ is asleep." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Epistola* 80, 2 [Storin 2019, 132])

employing literary devices and conventions mastered during his extensive education in the prestigious schools of Alexandria and Athens.[13] Indeed, Gregory stands as the first Christian poet to articulate in verse the existential doubts that assail every human being, the fears that encompass mortal existence, the exhausting spiritual struggle, the aspiration toward goodness, the fall into evil, and the subsequent pangs of conscience (cf. Fleury 1930, 346).

The most profound aspect of the Theologian's poetry lies in its synthesis of realistic human experience with theological interpretation, ultimately grounded in humanity's calling to theosis. The Saint's penetrating questions "Where is Your goodness, Christ? Have You forgotten me alone? Satan, having shattered me, cast me down, and You surrendered me to evil; what cause is this? Were we not promised dominion over scorpions? . . . Why must I suffer here, besieged by afflictions?" (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 89, 15–19 [PG 37, 1443])—remain without facile answers. Yet trust in God and faith do not preclude critical inquiry; rather, they enable deeper theological reflection within human capabilities. In this questioning and searching, one discovers a renewed path to God, for as Gregory affirms, all genuine seeking ultimately leads to the Divine. Gregory demonstrates a profound understanding that the only adequate response to questions about life's meaning resides in "the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

3. Hope Born of Faith

In a pattern characteristic of Gregory's theological method, we observe how he deliberately pursues his profound reflections to their existential limits, to points where despair seems inevitable, only to suddenly illuminate these moments of darkness with faith's transformative response: "Where will you stop while carrying me further, bad-counseling worry? Stop. Everything is secondary to God. Give in to reason. God didn't make me in vain. I am turning my back upon this song: this thing was from our feeblemindedness. Now's a fog, but afterwards the Word, and you'll know all, whether seeing God, or eaten up by fire." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 14, 123–28 [Gilbert 2001, 136–37]) In this dialectic, Gregory penetrates the depths of human nature with a dual purpose: to confront its tragic dimension in its fullness, while simultaneously revealing the path to God, Who alone can redeem humanity from nihilistic pessimism and existential despair: "In You, Christ, I place my hope, surpassing all ascetic endeavors," (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 76, 3

13 McGuckin's analysis illuminates Gregory's dual achievement as both theologian and poet: just as he strove for rhetorical excellence in his sermons, he worked to achieve genuine poetic mastery within Greek cultural norms (cf. McGuckin's 2006, 195).

[PG 37, 1423]) because I "look to future hopes, deciding that this is the only good thing." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Epistola* 7 [Storin 2019, 110]) Here the philosopher becomes theologian, affirming that one must trust in God's goodness regardless of self-understanding. Despite personal anguish, doubts, and disillusionment with a Church fractured by conflicts and heresies, Gregory's poetry manifests mature wisdom and unshakeable hope in divine providence's mysterious workings (cf. Musurillo 1970, 47).

The Saint thus challenges the Stoic doctrine that wisdom requires living without fear and hope (Seneca 2015, 31–33). For while acknowledging life's apparent darkness, Gregory's theological legacy ultimately rests on faith in God and its consequent hope: "Holding fast to Christ, I shall never abandon the hope of seeing the glory of the Consubstantial Trinity." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 85, 13–14 [PG 37, 1432]) What initially presents itself as pessimism becomes instead an occasion for proclaiming the evangelical truth that humanity's sole authentic hope amid suffering resides in the Lord, Whose mercy never abandons His creation. Furthermore, Gregory emphasizes humanity's fundamental vocation: as bearers of the divine image, humans are called to ascend from their current state of mortality and misery toward incorruption, deification (ἡ θέωσις),[14] and eternal life. Within this theological framework, suffering and the cross are transfigured from apparent termination points into gateways opening toward new life. Thus, one of Gregory the Theologian's central arguments for humanity's calling to live in hope is grounded in his distinctly positive anthropology.

Gregory articulates a tripartite structure of divine creation: first, the invisible realm of pure spirits—the angelic orders; second, the visible material cosmos; and finally, humanity as the crown of creation,

> a single living being from both spheres—from both invisible, I mean, and visible nature . . . a kind of second world, great in its littleness: another kind of angel, a worshipper of mixed origins, a spectator of the visible creation and an initiate into the intelligible, king of the things on earth yet ruled from above, earthly and heavenly, subject to time yet deathless, visible and knowable, standing halfway between greatness and lowliness; . . . a living being: cared for in this world, transferred to another, and, as the final stage of the mystery, made divine by his inclination towards God. (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 38, 11 [Daley 2006a, 122])

14 The foundational premise of Gregory the Theologian's anthropological doctrine centers on human deification (theosis). Created in the divine image and likeness, humanity finds its authentic identity through deification, which serves as the channel for the actualization of human potential. This deification transcends mere salvation, rather than being identical with it. Salvation restores to humanity what was forfeited in paradise—the capacity for progressive movement toward deification. Therefore, deification represents both the original purpose of human creation and the ultimate aim of human existence. It manifests as a transformative process initiated within temporal existence but reaching its full actualization only in eternity (cf. Tollefsen 2006, 257–70; Thomas 2019, 118–53).

Thus, Gregory suggests that the entire cosmos was fashioned specifically for humanity, who emerged last, like a king for whom a royal palace had been prepared.[15]

Humanity transcends mere creaturely status. Gregory boldly characterizes human nature in angelic terms: "Great is man, as a very Angel; when he jumps away, like a serpent, old and spotted, off he goes." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 15, 155–56 [Gilbert 2001, 144]) Yet even this angelic comparison falls short of humanity's ultimate vocation, for uniquely among all creation, humanity bears the divine image, created as god-in-potential, called to participate in Divine life within celestial glory: "Should you harbor low thoughts of yourself, remember: you are Christ's creation, Christ's breath, His sacred portion, thus both celestial and terrestrial, an eternally significant creation—a created god, who through Christ's redemptive suffering advances toward incorruptible glory."[16] (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 9, 130–134 [PG 37, 658]) For Gregory, this represents the supreme dignity bestowed upon humanity by God.

Beyond this intrinsic divine dignity, God endowed humanity with freedom and implanted divine law within the human heart. This reflects not divine desire for blind submission or coerced participation in Divine life, but rather God's intention that humanity, through mature development, should consciously embrace its nature and actively fulfill the Divine image bestowed as a pledge (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 1, 8, 100–104 [Gilbert 2001, 66]). Even the divine commandment functioned not as a restriction but as guidance for paradisal existence. Gregory interprets the prohibited tree as representing contemplation and divine knowledge,[17] emphasizing that this prohibition arose "not from divine malice or envy" but from pedagogical wisdom, recognizing that only the spiritually mature can safely approach divine contemplation (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 38, 12 [Daley 2006a, 123]), which "would be as hard to take as were some very powerful dish to infants." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 1, 8, 110–111 [Gilbert 2001, 67]) Humanity's primordial vocation was thus developmental: to mature through obedience to divine commandments, progressing from the tree of knowledge toward the tree of life

15 This theological perspective finds parallels in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa—*On the Creation of Man* (PG 44, 132D–133A; 136BD; 141B; 144B), *On Christ's Resurrection* (PG 46, 662B), and *Against Apollinarius* (PG 45, 1213D). For modern analysis, cf. Trisoglio 2009, 215; Thomas 2019, 75–77.

16 Gregory's poem "On the Soul" presents his mature understanding of human participation in divine life: "From dirt and breath he made a man, image of the immortal: for mind's lordly nature is in both. And so I feel attachment to this life, through what's earth in me, but inwardly long for another, through the part that's divine." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 1, 8, 74–78 [Gilbert 2001, 65])

17 Gregory's interpretation of the tree of knowledge reveals his nuanced understanding of spiritual maturity: "This latter was the tree of knowledge; it was not originally planted with evil intent, nor prohibited out of ill-will, . . . but was a good thing, if partaken at the right time. For the plant was contemplation, by my interpretation—something which may only safely be attempted by those who have reached perfection in an orderly way. So it was not beneficial for those still in a state of immaturity, greedy in appetite, just as mature food does not profit those who are still infants, still in need of milk." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 38, 12 [Daley 2006a, 122–23])

(cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 44, 4 [Daley 2006a, 157]). During this "testing-ground," (Ruether 1969, 135) humanity was called to cultivate the divine seeds (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 2, 17 [PG 35, 425]), actively participate in its own deification, approaching the fruit of divine knowledge only at the appropriate season of spiritual maturity.[18]

Humanity, rather than maintaining fidelity to the divine word, succumbed to diabolic persuasion, attempting to ascend directly to divine contemplation through autonomous effort, refusing the graduated pedagogical revelation divinely ordained (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 36, 5 [Vinson 2003, 223–24]). This perversion transformed humanity's God-given theological aspiration into the paradoxical instrument of its fall, alienating it from both God and its created purpose. The ancestral sin thus manifested not merely as disobedience but as a fundamental crisis of faith, generating existential hopelessness. Through this transgression, humanity lost both its paradisiacal state and its capacity for divine communion, becoming self-referential and spiritually enclosed.

Gregory articulates this post-lapsarian condition with stark clarity: "As a direct result, I, naked and ugly, came to know my nakedness and clothed myself in a garment of skin and fell from the garden and returned to the ground from which I was taken with nothing to show from that perfect existence except an awareness of my own misery." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 19, 14 [Vinson 2003, 104]) In this quotation, Gregory profoundly reflects on the consequences of the fall, using the first person to emphasize the universality of the human experience of falling. The "nakedness and ugliness" indicate the loss of original glory and dignity; the "garment of skin" symbolizes the mortality and corruptibility that humans experienced after sin; "expulsion from paradise" signifies not merely physical banishment, but the loss of the state of deification and closeness to God. Particularly profound theological meaning is contained in the concluding irony: "except an awareness of my own misery"—instead of the knowledge of good and evil promised by the serpent, humanity received only a painful awareness of its own wretchedness, which, however, can become the first step toward salvation through recognizing the necessity of God's mercy.

Here we observe Gregory's distinctive understanding of the fall not simply as juridical disobedience, but as an ontological catastrophe that fundamentally altered human nature, transforming human existence into a journey of trial and suffering. Nevertheless, throughout Gregory's corpus, this somber evaluation of the human condition is consistently balanced by hope in restoration through Christ's Incarnation. Divine fidelity transcends human infidelity—God's trustworthiness remains immutable, for "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). Even after the fall, humanity retained its fundamental character as "ζῶον θεούμενον"

18 This developmental view of human spiritual growth shows interesting parallels with Irenaeus of Lyons's understanding of spiritual maturation (cf. *Adversus haereses* IV, 38, 1 [SC 100, 943–49]).

(Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 38, 11 [Daley 2006a, 122])—a being capable of deification, since "it would not be right for the great God's image to disintegrate in formlessness, like mindless lizards and kine, even though sin has brought it to a mortal condition." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* 1, 1, 8, 3–6 [Gilbert 2001, 62])

The divine response to humanity's lost hope manifests in the Incarnation, where God Himself, motivated by philanthropic love, enters human existence to complete His creative work, because "it was not God's way to ignore them." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 39, 13 [Daley 2006a, 134]) Gregory characterizes the Incarnation and human salvation as "mystery" *par excellence*, "an ineffable wonder evoking reverent awe." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 38, 13 [Daley 2006a, 123–24]; cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 39, 13 [Daley 2006a, 133–34]; *Or.* 45, 29 [PG 36, 661–64]) In Christ, human nature finds its integrity restored, sin's damage healed, and liberation from diabolic bondage accomplished. The Incarnate Word reunites humanity with God and reestablishes the possibility of deification: "Through the medium of the mind he had dealings with the flesh, being made that God on earth which is Man. Man and God blended; they became a single whole, the stronger side predominating, in order that I might be made God to the same extent that he was made man." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 29, 19 [Norris 1991, 257) For we were created for theosis and place our hope in that which befits divine majesty (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 4, 124 [PG 35, 664]).

Gregory the Theologian, in accord with other Church Fathers, emphasizes the fundamentally eschatological dimension of hope, rooted in Christ Himself who suffered, died, and rose for humanity's salvation. In his theological vocabulary, hope consistently carries transcendent connotations: he refers to it as "heavenly hope" (ἡ ἐλπίς οὐράνιος) (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 15, 112 [Gilbert 2001, 142]; cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 1, 287 [PG 37, 991]; *Carm.* II, 1, 45, 282 [Gilbert 2001, 167]; *Carm.* II, 1, 96 [PG 37, 1450]), "hope of the future life" (τὰς ἐκεῖθεν ἐλπίδας) (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 25, 325 [PG 37, 836]; cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 28, 272 [PG 37, 876]; *Or.* 3, 7 [PG 35, 524]; *Or.* 8, 13 [Daley 2006a, 70]; *Or.* 32, 33 [Vinson 2003, 215]), and links it intimately with the future contemplation of the Trinity's light (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 16, 35–36 [Gilbert 2001, 146]; cf. *Carm.* II, 1, 85, 14 [PG 37, 1432]). This understanding resonates with Basil of Caesarea, who declares blessed those placing their complete hope in the Lord:

> Blessed are those who, in hope of the age to come (ἐλπίδι τοῦ μέλλοντος αἰῶνος), live their present life exchanging temporal for eternal things. Whether united with God in flames like the three youths in Babylon, imprisoned with lions, or swallowed by a whale—such ones we must count blessed. They should remain joyful, not grieving over present circumstances but rejoicing in the hope of eternal life (τῇ ἐλπίδι τῶν εἰς ὕστερον ἡμῖν ἀποκειμένων εὐφραινομένους). (Basilius Magnus, *Homilia de gratiarum actione* 3 [PG 31, 224])

Gregory of Nyssa meanwhile locates the ground for joy in the hope of resurrection, when the earthly body shall be transfigured:

> If you have some fondness for this body, and you are sorry to be unyoked from what you love, do not be in despair about this either. For although this bodily covering is now dissolved by death, you will see it woven again from the same elements, not indeed with its present coarse and heavy texture, but with the thread respun into something subtler and lighter, so that the beloved body may be with you and be restored to you again in better and even more lovable beauty. (Gregorius Nyssenus, *De anima et resurrectione* [Roth 2002, 88])

Here Gregory of Nyssa articulates how at the resurrection each person will receive a body restored to its pre-lapsarian state: free from pain, aging, and imperfection. Instead, Gregory the Theologian's anthropological vision transforms even death—traditionally conceived as ultimate hopelessness—into an element of divine providence, mediating between finite creation and immortality. While constituting punishment and the temporary eclipse of humanity's iconic dimension,[19] death paradoxically becomes a salvific blessing and ground for hope: "Even here he drew a profit of a kind: death, and an interruption to sin; so wickedness did not become immortal, and the penalty became a sign of love for humanity."[20] (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 38, 12 [Daley 2006a, 123])

It is crucial to note, however, that Gregory the Theologian's conception of hope extends beyond its eschatological dimension. His theology equally emphasizes hope in God within temporal existence. For Gregory, Christ's present mercy toward His creation serves as the foundational argument for earthly hope. He frequently invokes this mercy in his reflections on personal suffering (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 69, 1–7 [McGuckin 1986, 15]; cf. *Carm.* II, 1, 76, 4 [McGuckin 1986, 16]). This confidence rests on salvation history's recurring demonstrations of divine mercy:

> Who received with mercy our forefather, the first author of sin and blood, when he lamented his transgression and deception? Who purified the corrupted Manasseh through tears? Who liberated David from grievous sin? Who preserved penitent Nineveh? Who wept for the prodigal? Who, while embracing the righteous, did not reject even tax collectors? Who

19 Gregory, consonant with the predominant Eastern patristic tradition, maintained that mortality was not inherent in human nature's original constitution, but rather emerged as a consequence of the ancestral sin, through which humanity deviated from its natural state. In the pre-lapsarian condition, immortality was not a supernatural grace that could be forfeited through sin, but rather constituted an intrinsic component of our nature (cf. Winslow 1979, 67).

20 A similar interpretation of death is found in the writings of others Church Fathers: Irenaeus of Lyon (cf. *Adversus haereses* III, 23, 7 [SC 34, 395–96]), Gregory of Nyssa (cf. *Oratio Catechetica* 8 [PG 45, 33–40]).

> carried the lost sheep on His shoulders? Who cleansed lepers and banished afflictions, bestowing healing to body and soul? These manifestations of Your grace, O Blessed One, O Light of humanity! Descend upon our tempestuous existence, and still our storms! (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 46, 39–50 [PG 37, 1380–1381])

Thus Gregory exhorts humanity toward unwavering hope in God, grounded in confidence in divine mercy. This understanding resonates with his friend Basil, who affirms that "hope in the Lord surpasses all things," and when united with faith, it can accomplish even what seems impossible (Basilius Magnus, *Epistola* 145 [PG 32, 593]).

In this earthly context, Gregory the Theologian speaks of "good hope" (ἡ ἐλπίς ἐσθλός) (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 9, 118 [PG 37, 677]) or "better hope" (ἡ ἐλπίς χρηστοτέρα) (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 17, 3 [Vinson 2003, 87]; cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 18, 30 [PG 35, 1024]; *Or.* 24, 8 [Vinson 2003, 146]), and describes hope as a Divine remedy in sufferings. Particularly in *Oration* 17, the Saint, addressing the inhabitants of Nazianzus, exhorts them to maintain firm hope in the Lord amid their earthly afflictions (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 17, 2–3 [Vinson 2003, 86–88]; cf. also *Epistola* 92 [Storin 2019, 128–29]). Here he supports his words with Old Testament passages where David also turns to God in his sufferings and finds salvation in hope that heals him:

> He gives himself hope, the balm for human difficulties (τοῖς στενοῖς φάρμακον). I waited, he declares, for God that should deliver me from distress of spirit and from tempest. We see him doing the same thing on another occasion too: he administers the remedy for his affliction at once and by his actions as well as his words provides us with a fine example of fortitude in the face of adversity. (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 17, 2 [Vinson 2003, 87])

In this passage, Gregory further underscores the inseparable bond between hope and joy, affirming that the Lord never forsakes those who place their trust in Him. Elsewhere in his writings, Gregory offers an even more profound insight: God not only responds to our hope but takes the initiative, hastening to meet humanity and "grants us far more than what we hope for." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 7, 23 [PG 35, 785])

From our examination of Gregory's thought emerges a theological vision distinctly removed from mere optimism; he never sought to offer his audience facile assurances of temporal well-being, health, prosperity, or happiness. Instead, Gregory embodied a profound faith that manifested itself in unwavering confidence that all events unfold according to Divine providence (cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 1, 27, 74–75 [PG 37, 504]). Finally, as established above, Saint Gregory rested the entirety of his hope in God (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 2, 113 [PG 35, 512]) and consistently exhorts his readers to anchor their hope not in ephemeral human expectations or transient realities, but in faith in the Divine: "for humans, there's but one

thing safe and sound: heavenly hopes, (ἐλπίδες οὐράνιαι)"[21]—he declares in his profound meditation *On the Vanity of the External World* (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* I, 2, 15, 112 [Gilbert 2001, 142]). This theological hope alone infuses meaning into both existence and suffering:

> We're born, we age, we reach the measure of our days; I sleep, I rest, I wake again, I go my way with health and sickness, joys and struggles as my fare, sharing the seasons of the sun, the fruits of earth, and death, and then corruption—just like any beast, whose life, though lowly, still is innocent of sin! What more do I have? Nothing more, except for God! Were I not yours, my Christ, this life would be a crime! (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 74, 4–12 [Daley 2006b, 170])

Only faith in God and hope in Him renders humanity the Divine image and establishes participation in the Divine life for which it was created.

Conclusions

In the theological legacy of Gregory of Nazianzus—whom the Church at the Council of Chalcedon (451) rightfully bestowed the title "Theologian" (cf. Mansi 1762, 468; Chrestou 1982, 366)—we encounter a unique synthesis of profound theological thought and lived spiritual experience. In his poetic works, he emerges as an ordinary human being who suffers, struggles, and seeks God. Delving into the depths of human nature, Gregory does not despair but searches with profound trust for answers to life's complex questions.

Gregory's life and work reveal apparent contradictions: the desire for solitude alongside the acceptance of the episcopal throne in Constantinople, weariness of life coupled with unwavering commitment to ecclesiastical service, and moments of despair alongside unshakeable trust in God. Yet these contradictions find resolution in the light of his fundamental theological intuition: care for God and neighbor, with God always maintaining primacy. Despite melancholic undertones in his poetry, Gregory remains far from pessimism—he neither seeks escape from the world nor condemns human nature. Instead, he presents the image of a Christian perfectly oriented toward supernatural realities while remaining deeply rooted in human society.

Amid sufferings and difficult life experiences, Gregory consistently emphasizes the Christian's special calling to hope. For him, this hope is not an abstract theological concept but a living experience of communion with God, whose content is the

21 Gregory's concept of "heavenly hope" culminates in theosis: "When we become fully like God, with room for God and God alone. This is the maturity towards which we speed!" (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Or.* 30, 6 [Norris 1991, 266])

anticipation of the fullness of the Heavenly Kingdom, granted to humanity even in temporal life. Christian hope, unlike ordinary human optimism, is grounded in the real foretaste and anticipation of eternal life. It stands between two extremes: gloomy pessimism, which considers all efforts futile, and superficial optimism, which ignores the reality of suffering. True hope, according to Gregory, entails sober acceptance of reality, active pursuit of solutions, and the ability to hold fast to God's promises even when their fulfillment remains unseen, "for all lies within Your knowledge alone, my King and Word, You who govern the cosmos according to sublime and ineffable laws, of which we, in our blindness and corruption, perceive but the faintest reflection." (Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Carm.* II, 1, 42, 18–31 [PG 37, 1345–46])

The key to understanding Gregory's conception of hope lies in his teaching about humanity, which might be termed an "anthropology of hope": though earthly and mortal, humans are created in the Divine Image and called to participate in divine life and theosis. This positive teaching about human nature assumes particular relevance in the context of the contemporary identity crisis. In a world filled with suffering and contradictions, hope emerges as an existential answer to questions about the meaning of human existence, opening the perspective of personal communion with God—from creation to eschatological fulfillment in eternity.

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