

CHAPTER

10

A DESIRE FOR ALL IS THE DESIRE  
FOR GOD

“SEXUAL ORIENTATION” IN LIGHT OF GREGORY  
OF NYSSA’S ACCOUNT OF GENDER, DESIRE,  
AND THE SOUL’S ASCENT TO GOD

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**Preliminary Considerations: Homosexuality Debates  
and a Way through Contested Anthropologies**

The topic of sexual orientation—that is, the sex of a person to whom someone is sexually attracted—has become such an emotive subject in contemporary theological discussion. Current homosexuality debates foster two extreme positions that oversimplify a much more complicated set of theological alternatives. On the one hand, there is the theological conservatism that is associated by its opponents with political conservatism, ecclesiastical authoritarianism, and repression, and, on the other, there is the theological liberalism that is associated with political liberalism, justice, and “promiscuous” libertinism. Both positions have been largely determined in relation to the way they respond to the recognition of LGBTQI rights in the political sphere.

Yet, despite their immense differences, both positions confine the mystery of the human persons created in the image and likeness of God to historically constructed categories—namely, “homosexuality,” “heterosexuality,” “bisexuality,” “asexuality,” etc.<sup>1</sup> An insidious view that identifies a human being as something—i.e., homosexual or heterosexual—has crept into theological discourse. Regardless of their different motives and ethical aspirations,

both positions ascribe an identity to human persons and objectify them. The main purpose of objectification is to know somebody by defining *what they are* in terms of certain properties and qualities (age, color, nationality, weight, psychological state, sexual orientation, etc.). By identifying someone, the knower controls them. One can identify something in such a way that it can serve one's own needs or comply with one's own ideologies.<sup>2</sup> For example, one could identify women as tender and therefore more suitable for staying at home, bringing up one's children. One could identify people who are attracted to people of the same sex as promiscuous and thus as irredeemably sinful. When one objectifies someone, not only does one see them as commodities but one also imprisons them in one's own representation, annihilating the alterity of the other.

Besides admitting historically constructed categories and objectifying human beings, both positions assume a very narrow understanding of sexuality that limits it to sexual attraction and sexual intercourse.

If one were to liberate oneself from the constraints of historical and culturally constructed categories that have caused divisions and discriminations, and wished to resist objectifying others, one has first to assume an ontology of personhood that gives priority to "who" one is and not to "what" one is, and that defines the human person as a unique free being that surpasses their nature, rather than being determined by any biological necessity.<sup>3</sup> Second, one needs to adopt an eschatological perspective according to which we are no longer identified by our past but by our future.<sup>4</sup> Finally, one has to remain faithful to an ecclesial (that is, Christ-like) mode of being that is fully expressed, as I will demonstrate in what follows, in the ascetic life of the faithful.

Current homosexuality debates and theological discussions about sexuality need to be separated from culturally constructed understandings of the issue and categories that violate the freedom of human persons and insult the "image of God" in every human being—that is, that offend persons' uniqueness. The crucial question to be answered is whether there is a natural essence of homosexuality and/or heterosexuality. Critical theorists and other historians have traced the genealogies of these terms, showing that these categories are social constructions.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, can we argue for a natural essence of femininity and a natural essence of masculinity? Are human beings first understood as men and women who have then to fulfill socially imposed gender requirements?

Judith Butler's critical theory serves as the starting point of any contemporary discussion on the above questions of gender and sexuality. Her contribution to gender theory involves a radical critique of identity categories in which not only gender, but also sex, sexuality, and the body are conceived of as cultural products.<sup>6</sup> She reveals the ways in which sex and gender are produced within a binary framework that is conditioned by heterosexuality, rather than the other way round. Thus, it is not that sex and gender produce heterosexuality, but that heterosexuality produces sex and gender in a binary form.<sup>7</sup> For Butler, gender identifications are not something that are given in biology, or that form some sort of essential self. An important aspect of her critique of identity is that the categories through which embodied subjects come into being are never fully determining.<sup>8</sup> This allows for the possibility of resistance to gender identifications.<sup>9</sup> Summarizing Butler's arguments, the theologian Mary McClintock Fulkeston points out:

As a dominant ordering of reality, compulsory heterosexuality regulates pleasure and bodies; it cuts up reality into two human identities and defines how they may legitimately experience. . . . [D]esire is channeled and defined by the sexes it connects; and those sexes are two—male and female. Any thinking about desire and human relations is locked into this grid; any subject which does not conform is disciplined.<sup>10</sup>

Within Orthodoxy, theological anthropology begins from the first three chapters of Genesis. Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man [*anthropos*] in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." The Orthodox patristic scholar Verna Harrison points out that despite the androcentrism of the late antique Mediterranean world in which they lived, nearly all the Fathers conclude that men and women alike bear the divine image. Moreover, there is consensus among Orthodox theologians that being according to the divine image is intrinsic to our nature. It gives men and women the capacity to become like God or not. Intellect, freedom, and the capacity for virtue and communion with God are central properties of human nature that manifest the divine image and are shared by all human beings. Their nature thus makes all people, despite their peripheral properties, capable of likeness to God, communion with him, and eternal life in the age to come—that is, salvation.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, the ontological status of sex and gender along with its implications are a subject of lively debate. In other words, although there is agreement regarding the central properties of human nature, there is disagreement as far as the centrality and thus essentiality of sex and gender. Orthodox theologians like Paul Evdokimov and Fr. Thomas Hopko,<sup>12</sup> influenced by Russian religious philosophy, German romanticism, and even evangelical Protestantism, are more inclined to see masculinity and femininity as ontological components of the human being and male and female genders as created by God with separate, complementary charisms and roles.<sup>13</sup> But other Orthodox theologians draw upon the writings of the Church Fathers and review patristic teachings on gender, especially the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–94) and Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580–662), and are skeptical of the claim that sexual differentiation in humans is part of God's original intention and will persist in the resurrection.<sup>14</sup>

Within Orthodoxy, current interest in the ontological status of sex and gender has been prompted by the challenging perspectives of feminist theology, the prospect of women's ordination, and very recently by homosexuals' plea for inclusion in the life of the Church. In the past thirty years there is a proliferation of conferences and academic writings on issues of gender and sexuality that all constitute direct or indirect responses to the rightful critiques that gender studies and liberation theologies have laid at the Orthodox Churches' door.<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, gender awareness has been introduced within Orthodoxy and the "lenses of the gender" have been rendered more visible than ever.

Current debates about anthropological issues revived theologians' interest in patristic thought and breathed new life into Eastern Orthodox tradition. Butler's thematization of gender fluidity and of subversive personal agency seem to echo older theistically oriented traditions.<sup>16</sup> The denaturalization of sex and gender is a theme shared with an older tradition of ascetical transformation.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Anglican and Roman Catholic feminist theologians like Sarah Coakley and Tina Beattie, as well as Orthodox theologians,<sup>18</sup> argue for the relevance of the Eastern Orthodox tradition to contemporary issues of gender and sexuality. It seems that many feminist theologians revisit the Eastern Orthodox tradition, particularly the works of Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, in order to find liberating resources. What these theologians try to do is to explore the different ways in which tradition might be interpreted in response to contemporary questions about sexuality.<sup>19</sup> Yet academic honesty requires

subscribing to Harrison's observation that "while Gregory's ideas are often highly suggestive and of relevance to contemporary discussions, it is essential to understand him in his own historical and theological context and not to make a simple equation between his anthropology and philosophical or theological positions current in our time."<sup>20</sup>

Thus, in what follows I draw upon the writings of Gregory of Nyssa in order to present three aspects of his theological reflections on gender and sexuality that could be employed in current discussions about homosexuality and homosexuals' plea for inclusion in the life of the Church. Far from equating Gregory's teachings with current philosophical and queer theory positions and aspirations, I argue that Gregory's anthropology and his theory of gender, his understanding of desire along with his account of the soul's ascent to God, can be employed to achieve the following: first to challenge the assumption that sexuality is somehow exhausted in sexual intercourse, and second to overcome objectification and divisions and get past discrimination against LGBTQI people by stressing that everyone is in the image of God, and by reflecting on every human being's sexual orientation by the same theological standards—that is, of progressive nonattachment to worldly realities and of ascetical transformation of sexuality.

### Gregory of Nyssa's Eschatologically Oriented Theory of Gender

Gregory's eschatologically oriented theory of gender, which is not captive to a culturally and historically defined sexual ideology, needs to be understood in the context of his profound apophatic sensibility about the divine essence and his doctrine of double creation that can be interpreted (and has been interpreted by the early generation of scholarship and Christian Orthodox patristic scholars<sup>21</sup>) as depriving sexual difference of any ontological significance.<sup>22</sup> In the seventh homily on the *Song of Songs*, Gregory understands the bridegroom's mother in the Canticle allegorically as God the Father and writes:

Now no one who has given thought to the way we talk about God is going to be overprecise about the sense of the name—that "mother" is mentioned instead of "father," for he will gather the same meaning from either term. For the Divine is neither male nor female. (How, after all, could any such thing be conceived in the case of Deity, when

this condition is not permanent even for us human beings, but when we all become one in Christ, we put off the signs of this difference along with the whole of the old humanity?) For this reason, every name we turn up is of the same adequacy for purposes of pointing to the unutterable Nature, since neither “male” nor “female” defiles the meaning of the inviolate Nature. Hence in the Gospel a father is said to give a marriage feast for a son, while the prophet addresses God, saying, “You have put a crown of precious stone on his head” and then asserts that the crown was put on the Bridegroom’s head by his mother. So, there is one wedding feast and the Bride is one, and the crown is placed on the head of the Bridegroom by one agent. Hence it makes no difference whether God calls the Only Begotten “Son of God” or “Son of his love” (Col 1:13), as Paul has it, since whichever name is used it is one Power who escorts the Bridegroom to our marriage.<sup>23</sup>

In this passage, Gregory’s apophatic sensibility about the divine essence along with his understanding of analogy and linguistic symbolism become apparent. Being neither male nor female, God can equally be called “father” and/or “mother.” The genderless God is normative for humanity and not the other way round. So Orthodox Christianity does not understand the male (created) human being as the normative human.<sup>24</sup> Rather, in Christ, we put off the signs of sexual difference along with the whole of the old humanity. Gregory is not captive to sexual ideology, which allows him more linguistic freedom in terms of gendered analogies. In his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, he seems interested in this “one wedding feast,” in the only “marriage” that matters—that is, the human beings’ spiritual union with God. That is why he represents the relationship between the soul and God, and between Christ and the Church, through nuptial imagery. But Gregory’s “bride” is not a woman, for in Chapter 20 of his treatise *On Virginity*, when speaking of spiritual marriage, he clearly states that

the argument applies equally to men and women, to move them towards such a marriage. “There is neither male nor female,” the Apostle says; “Christ is all, and in all”; and so it is equally reasonable that he who is enamoured of wisdom should hold the Object of his passionate desire, Who is the True Wisdom; and that the soul which cleaves to the undying Bridegroom should have the fruition of her love for the true Wisdom, which is God. We have now sufficiently

revealed the nature of the spiritual union, and the Object of the pure and heavenly Love.<sup>25</sup>

Gregory's use of nuptial symbolism in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs* needs to be interpreted as a form of language that transcends the body's sexual particularity, for sexual difference is not permanent and has thus no ontological significance. When writing these homilies (391–94),<sup>26</sup> he had already written his treatise *On the Making of the Human Being* (378–79) where Gregory interpreted the creation stories in Gen. 1 and Gen. 2 in terms of a double creation. In Chapter 16 of this treatise, he makes a distinction between the first creation of spiritual beings in the image of God, and the creation of human beings, embodied and marked by sexual differentiation.<sup>27</sup> As Gregory explains:

For as indeed a particular human being is enclosed by the size of his body, and the magnitude corresponding to the outward surface of the body is the measure of his subsistence, so, it seems to me, the whole plenitude of humanity was encompassed by the God of all through the power of foreknowledge, as if indeed in one body, and the text teaches this which says, "And God created the human being, according to the image of God he created him" [Gen 1:27a]. For the image is not in part of the nature, nor is the grace in a certain entity observed in it, but such power extends equally to all the [human] race. A sign of this is that mind is established in all alike; all have the power of rational thought and deliberation, and all the other things through which the divine nature is imaged in that which has been created according to it. The human being manifested at the first creation of the world and the one that will come into being at the consummation of all are alike, equally bearing in themselves the divine image. Because of this, the whole [of humankind] was named as one human being, since to the power of God nothing is either past or future, but what is expected is encompassed equally with what is present by the energy that rules all. So the whole nature, extending from the first to the last, is, as it were, one image of the Existing One; the distinction between male and female was fashioned last [Gen 1:27b], added to what was formed.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, according to the above excerpt, the first account of the human made in the image of God refers to a creation in which the human is a form of

presexual, angelic being. As Gregory further explains in Chapter 17 of the same treatise, sexual embodiment is a feature of a secondary, material creation in which God's foreknowledge of the Fall makes sexuality contingent upon the coming of death into creation and does not refer to the image of God in the human. Therefore, at the resurrection we shall be restored to our original, presexual condition in the image of God. As Gregory puts it:

but while looking upon the nature of man in its entirety and fullness by the exercise of His foreknowledge, and bestowing upon it a lot exalted and equal to the angels, since He saw beforehand by His all-seeing power the failure of their will to keep a direct course to what is good, and its consequent declension from the angelic life, in order that the multitude of human souls might not be cut short by its fall from that mode by which the angels were increased and multiplied,—for this reason, I say, He formed for our nature that contrivance for increase which befits those who had fallen into sin, implanting in mankind, instead of the angelic majesty of nature, that animal and irrational mode by which they now succeed one another.<sup>29</sup>

Valerie Karras draws upon the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa and various other Church Fathers and argues that God's creation of humanity follows a pattern of stages. (1) God decides to create humanity in His image, and after His likeness; (2) God creates humanity in His image, but adds gender, which is not part of God's image, due to His foreknowledge of humanity's Fall (and for procreative purposes); (3) humanity falls from grace, with the concomitant results of active human sexuality and the domination of man over woman; (4) Christ redeems humanity; and (5) in the resurrection God's design for humanity is completed and fulfilled: Humanity exists as God originally intended, without the distinction of sexual differentiation.<sup>30</sup> Eventually, human beings are affected by their biological (postlapsarian) nature and instincts, but are not restricted by their sexed body, for they are called to transcend biological necessity.

Thus, although Gregory envisioned the abolition of sexual division as a component of physical human nature in the eschaton, noetic gender—that is, gender understood as a concept of the mind—remains for him an important human characteristic but as a soteriological characteristic (that remains a concept in the symbolic order). Thus, he liberated gender(s) from the strictures of physical sexed body—that is, the garments of the skin—



calling us all to overcome gender stereotypes (pointing to their functioning as postlapsarian symbols), calling women to be “male” in terms of spiritual strength in this life and men to be “female” in terms of spiritual fecundity in the next. Thus, the best human traits (which are culturally attributed to both genders) are to be cultivated by all human beings irrespective of sex.<sup>31</sup> “In fact, the virtues of gender must be divorced from physical sex since otherwise they would become instincts, which—with the exception of the ‘instinct’ of erotic love for God—for Gregory cannot be virtuous since they do not emanate from acts of free will.”<sup>32</sup>

### The Education of Desire: Fleshly Passion and Passionate Desire for God

The previous section closed by highlighting the fact that, according to Gregory’s eschatologically oriented theory of gender, regardless of their sexed bodies and/or gender, all human beings are free to cultivate the same traits and virtues and achieve spiritual fecundity. In this section, I focus on the importance of human sexuality and desire,<sup>33</sup> desire’s malleable quality and its capacity to focus on blind impulses and things unnecessary and/or on good things, the true beauty—that is, God.

Thus, sexuality seems to refer to two things, one very specific and the other more general. Specifically, sexuality means sexual orientation: that is, the sex of a person to whom someone’s sexually attracted.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, sexuality is bound to an individualized and physicalized desire, assuming that sexual enactment somehow exhausts it.<sup>35</sup> More broadly, sexuality is everything about someone’s personhood and energy: the way they interact with others and the world. In this second understanding, sexuality is about everything that stimulates our excitement, creativity, and engagement with the world around us. In this sense, sexuality is linked to a broader understanding of desire(s). In this sense, desire is a very inclusive term (referring to a mode of being—that is, to longing itself). Thus, desire includes the desire to dominate, to subjugate, to consume, to own as well as to love, empathize, work for the common good, and so on.

In terms of the patristic tradition, desire is no less than that which continuously animates us to God, as Gregory of Nyssa also taught: It gives us the energy of the participation in the divine life. The faculty of desire (ἡ επιθυμητικὴ δύναμις) is placed in the soul to create a longing for God. Desire is given by God. In the fourth homily on the *Song of Songs*, Gregory

says: “You see why you have a faculty of desire, in order, namely, that you may conceive an appetite for the *apple*, the delight of which takes many forms for those who have drawn near to it.”<sup>36</sup> For Gregory, desire can be trained and is thus closely linked to free will and reason that play an important role in moderating desire in order to reach its proper goal, that is, passionate pursuit of the Beautiful and contemplation of the divine.<sup>37</sup> As Gregory puts it:

When it has been trained and purified of all of them, appetite will be turned in its activity to what alone is to be longed for, desired, and loved, not by having completely quenched the impulses naturally innate in us for such things, but by transforming them for the immaterial participation in good things.<sup>38</sup>

It seems that desire is very much valued in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Drawing upon the writings of Dionysius Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor, John Zizioulas argues that “God, the Other *par excellence*, as *eros* both moves outside himself and attracts to himself as *the ultimate destination* of their desire those whose desire he provokes.” In terms of Zizioulas’s understanding of desire, “desire cannot move beyond the Other, the desired one; the Other *is* the ‘term’ of desire. At the same time, the Other, who is the term of Desire, is also the *cause* of desire, as he moves himself towards us, even to the point of uniting with us (Incarnation).”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, desire is an ontological category belonging primarily to God, and only secondarily to humans as a token of their createdness “in the image.”

Sarah Coakley points out that in God, desire signifies no lack—as it manifestly does in humans, reminding them of their created source.<sup>40</sup> Explaining the nature, role, and purpose of human desire, Gregory’s sister, Macrina, says: “Again, if we were to define what desire is in itself, we shall call it a seeking for what one lacks, or a yearning for the enjoyment of some pleasure.”<sup>41</sup> If desire belongs primarily to God and is thus ontologically basic, both sex and gender (which nowadays tends to connote the way embodied relations are carved up and culturally adjudicated) are to be set in right subjection to that desire.<sup>42</sup> Following in Sarah Coakley’s footsteps, I think that the obsession with sex and gender and with the sex of a person to whom someone is sexually attracted resides in the lack of God as a final point of reference. According to a Christian understanding of desire, orientation, or attraction, the most important orientation is the orientation to God, toward divine desire. So, I suggest we should shift our atten-

tion from debating about the problem of homosexuality (or any other sexuality) to dealing with the more crucial questions of putting desire for God above all other desires, and of judging human desires only in that light.<sup>43</sup> But how can we identify the difference in these many desires that we have (most of which are toxic) in order to move from the corrupt to the sublime within them? How can we put desire for God above all other desires? By processes of education, self-knowledge, humility, prayer, and reliance on divine grace.<sup>44</sup> In short, we arrive at the realm of the ascetic life that involves the transformation of sexuality as the soul progresses in perfection.

### Anagogic: Lifestyle and the Transformation of Sexuality

In his writings, Gregory of Nyssa elaborates at length on the stages of the soul's ascent to God—that is, on the soul's progress in perfection.<sup>45</sup> According to Gregory's threefold account of the stages of the soul's ascent to God, first we have the soul's initial withdrawal from wrong and erroneous ideas of God and then the soul becomes aware of the vanity of cosmic things and is guided through sense phenomena to the world of the invisible. Finally, after having been illuminated and purified and after having been transformed into something divine and sinless, the soul can enter within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge.<sup>46</sup>

By discussing the stages of the soul's ascent to God, Gregory actually presents his case for an anagogic lifestyle, a mode of living, an education of desires that will constantly draw a person toward God. In his treatise *On Virginity*, Gregory presents his vision of desire that does not require a disjunctive approach to marriage and celibacy.<sup>47</sup> It seems that the treatise “entertains the thought that the godly ordering of desire is what conjoins the ascetic aims of marriage and celibacy, at their best, and equally what judges both of them, at their worst.”<sup>48</sup>

At the heart of Gregory's understanding of the anagogic lifestyle and the soul's progress in perfection lies his metaphor of the stream of desire and of its right direction, use, and even intensification in relation to God. In Chapter 7 of *On Virginity*, he writes:

Imagine a stream flowing from a spring and dividing itself off into a number of accidental channels. As long as it proceeds so, it will be useless for any purpose of agriculture, the dissipation of its waters

making each particular current small and feeble, and therefore slow. But if one were to mass these wandering and widely dispersed rivulets again into one single channel, he would have a full and collected stream for the supplies which life demands. Just so the human mind (so it seems to me), as long as its current spreads itself in all directions over the pleasures of the sense, has no power that is worth the naming of making its way towards the Real Good; but once call it back and collect it upon itself, so that it may begin to move without scattering and wandering towards the activity which is congenial and natural to it, it will find no obstacle in mounting to higher things, and in grasping realities. We often see water contained in a pipe bursting upwards through this constraining force, which will not let it leak; and this, in spite of its natural gravitation: in the same way, the mind of man, enclosed in the compact channel of an habitual continence, and not having any side issues, will be raised by virtue of its natural powers of motion to an exalted love. In fact, its Maker ordained that it should always move, and to stop is impossible to it; when therefore it is prevented employing this power upon trifles, it cannot be but that it will speed toward the truth, all improper exits being closed.<sup>49</sup>

In Chapter 8 of the same treatise, the same illustration of the water and the spring is employed by Gregory in order to present his view of marriage: “While the pursuit of heavenly things should be a man’s first care, yet if he can use the advantages of marriage with sobriety and moderation, he need not despise this way of serving the state.”<sup>50</sup> So, marriage is not a sacrament outside ecclesial and ascetical life, for the goodness of marriage derives from that to which it refers—that is, the eschaton. Following Gregory’s understanding of marriage, John Panteleimon Manousakis stresses its relative value and says: “Given, though, that ‘in the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage’ [Mt. 22:30], marriage derives its goodness from its own dissolution and, strangely, it succeeds only to the extent that it fails.”<sup>51</sup> In Chapter 13 of *On Virginity*, “without wishing to offend,” Gregory speaks oddly of the spiritual generation and says:

Truly a joyful mother is the virgin mother who by the operation of the Spirit conceives the deathless children, and who is called by the

Prophet barren because of her modesty only. This life, then, which is stronger than the power of death, is, to those who think, the preferable one. The physical bringing of children into the world—I speak without wishing to offend—is as much a starting-point of death as of life; because from the moment of birth the process of dying commences.<sup>52</sup>

The fact that Gregory praises virginity, spiritual marriage, and spiritual generation does not mean that sexual pleasure holds any intrinsic fear for him. Rather, his argument seems to be that we have to make a choice about what the final telos of our desire and sexual pleasure is.<sup>53</sup> Do we want to be “pleasure lover” or “God-lover?”<sup>54</sup> For Gregory, it is neither the body nor the sex that is the problem, but worldly interests and the freely chosen perverted passions.<sup>55</sup>

Karras examines *On Virginity* closely and shows that Gregory argues for a set of hierarchically ordered possibilities for erotic states of affairs—that is, for a hierarchy of lifestyles. More analytically, there is bad marriage, in which the external rules of fidelity may be kept but no spiritual unification of desire toward God occurs—no right channeling of eros/desire and no desire to bear the fruits of *leitourgia* (of service to others); bad celibacy, in which physical virginity may (or may not) be obeyed, but in which physical virginity is not leading to any transformation of the soul (there is no desire to bear the fruits of *leitourgia* and the virgin is still subject to false attachments); and then spiritually fruitful marriage and spiritually fruitful celibacy.<sup>56</sup> For Gregory, “since control of the higher spiritual passions and cultivation of virtue through active love are the most important elements in the spiritual life, the married person who can exercise proper control (channeling the water, to use Gregory’s analogy) ranks significantly above the mere physical virgin. The highest level, however, is the true virgin who lives an eschatological existence in anticipation by combining control of the negative passions with nurture of the positive virtues, exemplified in active love for others.”<sup>57</sup>

So, for Gregory, lifestyles are not hierarchically ordered on the basis of the type of people’s sexual attraction or of their abstaining from any sexual intercourse. Rather, controlling toxic passions, like dominating others, transforming carnal passions into passionate desire for God, and actively loving others are the standards according to which we are all judged.

### Concluding Remarks

The previous sections underlined three points in Gregory's teachings that can contribute to current discussions about human sexuality: First, by discussing the stages of the soul ascent to God, Gregory actually presents his case for an anagogic lifestyle according to which the ultimate goal of all the energy involved in sexuality is to intensify the desire for God. According to his threefold account of the stages of the soul's ascent to God, after having been illuminated and purified and after having been transformed into something divine and sinless, the soul (which is embodied and sexed) enters within the secret chamber of the divine knowledge, and here she "is entirely seized about by the divine darkness."<sup>58</sup> This final stage—which is the stage of unification with God through love—requires the soul's ultimate desire for God and is associated with the sacrament of Eucharist.

Second, Gregory reflects on marriage and celibacy alongside one another, using the same standards—that is, the goal of one's decision/praxis, the goal of *enkrateia* / physical celibacy, the goal of marriage, etc. So sexual desire and physical attraction, be it for the opposite or the same sex (but in any case, for another soul) has to be reflected by the same exacting standards of progressive nonattachment and ascetical transformation. It seems that Gregory's appreciation of desire lies in the possibility of its transformation. Instead of craving after evil or desiring worldly things, the soul yearns for "that mystical kiss," for all the purified soul wants is to "bring her mouth to the fount of light"<sup>59</sup> that is God. In other words, fleshly desire of all kinds can be treated as a divine gift and can thus be transformed into passionate desire for God. Gregory hopes that the soul will love God "as much as the body has a bent for what is akin to it."<sup>60</sup> For Gregory, if one has not experienced the motions of the flesh, one can find it difficult to transform desire and turn it toward God.

The third point that can contribute to the current theological discussions about human sexuality is Gregory's eschatologically oriented theory of gender that is understood in the context of his apophatic sensibility about the divine essence. This "apophatic turn" has the capacity not only to undermine gender stereotypes, but to lead to a form of ever-changing modeling of desire for God. In terms of an eschatologically oriented gender theory, the denaturalization of sexual difference is invested with ontological validity. In other words, it is only within a Christocentric (ecclesial and sacramental) epistemological framework that the ontological claim "there is no sexual

difference” is valid. The Christocentric and eschatologically oriented gender theory of Gregory subverts both gender essentialism and the culturally repressive web of sexual stereotypes.<sup>61</sup> Devoid of a meaningful horizon that is invested with ontological validity, human beings fail to achieve personal authenticity; everything is reduced to a physicalism that leads to despair and eventually brings death. So, in terms of Gregory’s eschatological anthropology and his account of the soul’s progress in perfection, the contemplative encounter with divine mystery will include the possibility of upsetting the “normal” vision of the sexes and gender altogether; but, as Coakley points out, it will also include an often-painful submission to other demanding tests of ascetic transformation—through fidelity to divine desire, and thence through fidelity to those whom we love in this world.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, arguing for both an eschatological anthropology and an ontology of personhood and against the objectification of the (O)ther, respecting the alterity of others and especially the Otherness of the divine, realizing that “God is Love” not only in the sense of God’s self-disclosure as love in the person of Christ but also in the sense of God’s loving before being, “doing the truth” instead of objectifying the others in order to know the truth, are crucial for our making of theology—that is to say, for our referring our speaking about God to communion with God. If we take the above into consideration, then certain practices would change: We would refuse labeling and objectifying others; the Church would struggle for inclusivity informed by love; and we would change our perspective when judging human relationships by focusing not on the sex of those who are in a relationship but on how they relate to each other, to the rest of the creation, and to God.

#### Notes

1. In the first book of his work *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault traces the genealogy of the modern concept of sexuality. “Sexuality,” he suggests, is by no means a fixed term that identifies an objective concept in the world. Rather, the notion of assigning an identity to an individual based on his or her sexual desire is a distinctively modern social construction. Before the nineteenth century there was no such thing as “sexuality” as such. Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1976). On the constructed nature of sexualities, see also David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

2. According to feminist theory, (sexual) objectification determines the lives of women to the extent that they can think of themselves only as objects. Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987) and Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1987).

3. Since the mid-twentieth century, drawing upon patristic thought, Orthodox theologians have developed theological accounts of personhood. See Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Personhood and Its Exponents in Twentieth-Century Orthodox Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 231–45. For an examination of some points of confluence between the theological accounts of personhood and contemporary gender and queer theory, see Bryce E. Rich, "A Queer Personhood: Freedom from Essentialism," in *"For I Am Wonderfully Made": Texts on Eastern Orthodoxy and LGBT Inclusion*, ed. Misha Cherniak, et al. (Nieuwegein, Netherlands: European Forum of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christian Groups, 2016), 39–60.

4. Drawing upon the theology of St. Maximus the Confessor, and commenting on Maximus's observation that "the things of the future state are truth" (PG 4.137D), Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon argues for an eschatological ontology and elaborates on its ethical implications. As he puts it: "An eschatological ontology would lead to a non-judgmental attitude towards our fellow human being in ontological terms such as stereotypes and permanent characterizations. Every person is entitled to a new identity, to a future." John Zizioulas, "'The End Is Where We Start From': Reflections on Eschatological Ontology," in *Game Over? Reconsidering Eschatology*, ed. Christophe Chalamet, Andreas Dettwiler, Mariel Mazzocco, and Ghislain Waterlot (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 275.

5. See note 1 in this chapter.

6. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993).

7. Gill Jagger, *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 2008), 1.

8. Jagger, *Judith Butler*, 7.

9. In a severe critique of Butler's opposition to norms and normative ideas such as equality and dignity, and of her denial of any precultural agency, the feminist political philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum wonders where the ability to resist gender identification comes from if there is no structure in the personality that is not thoroughly culture's and power's creation. Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody," *The New Republic* (February 22, 1999): <https://newrepublic.com/article/150687/professor-parody>. Following Nussbaum's



criticism, the feminist theologian Sarah Coakley argues that although in Butler's analysis one detects a spiritual yearning for personal authenticity, Butler's theory of resistance is merely reinstating the conditions of sexual oppression against which Butler chafes. Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation and God," in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 159.

10. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Gender—Being It or Doing It? The Church, Homosexuality, and the Politics of Identity," in *Que(e)rying Religion: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gary David Comstock and Susan E. Henking (New York: Continuum, 1999), 188–201, 193.

11. Nonna Verna Harrison, "The Human Person as Image and Likeness of God," in *Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, ed. Cunningham and Theokritoff, 80–81; and Nonna Verna Harrison, "Gregory of Nyssa on Human Unity and Diversity," *Studia Patristica* 41 (2006): 336.

12. Thomas Hopko, "On the Male Character of Christian Priesthood," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1975): 147–73; Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Woman*, trans. A. P. Gythiel (Crestwood, N.Y.: SVS Press, 1994).

13. Harrison, "The Human Person," 89; and Rich, "Queer Personhood," 48–49.

14. Harrison, "The Human Person," 89. See further Verna E. F. Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies* 41 (1990): 465–71; Valerie A. Karras, "Eschatology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. S. F. Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 243–60; Valerie A. Karras, "Sex/Gender in Gregory of Nyssa's Eschatology: Irrelevant or Non-Existent?," *Studia Patristica* 41 (2006): 363–68; and Valerie A. Karras, "Orthodox Theologies of Women and Ordained Ministry," in *Thinking through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Christian Scholars*, ed. A. Papanikolaou and E. Prodromou (Crestwood, N.Y.: SVS Press, 2008), 113–58.

15. The proceedings of two conferences, one in 1988 and the other in 2015, illustrate the development of Eastern Orthodox theological discourse concerning issues of gender, equality, and inclusion. Gennadios Limouris, ed., *The Place of Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women* (Katerini, Greece: Tertios Publications, 1992) [in Greek] and Petros Vassiliadis, Niki Papageorgiou, and Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi, eds., *Deaconesses: The Ordination of Women and Orthodox Theology* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

16. Coakley, "The Eschatological Body," 157.

17. Coakley, "The Eschatological Body," 159.

18. Karras, "Eschatology"; and Harrison, "Gregory of Nyssa on Human Unity and Diversity."

19. Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), 117.

20. Harrison, "Gregory of Nyssa on Human Unity and Diversity," 344.

21. Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nyse* (Aubier: Éditions Mouton, 1944), 51–53, 56, 167–68; Harrison, "Male and Female," 467–68 and especially note 93; and Karras, "Sex/Gender," 363–68.

22. For a critical review of the scholarship concerning the ontological status of sex in Gregory of Nyssa's anthropology and the question of whether the resurrection body is degenitalized, see Raphael A. Cadenhead, *The Body and Desire: Gregory of Nyssa's Ascetical Theology* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 96–98, 104; Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 163–201; Warren J. Smith, "The Body of Paradise and the Body of the Resurrection: Gender and the Angelic Life in Gregory of Nyssa's 'De hominis opificio,'" *The Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 2 (2006): 207–28. Although Gregory admits through his sister, Macrina, that we are unable to give a definitive answer to the question of whether human genitalia will be restored at the resurrection (Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 104), "the overall direction of his thought is clear: he regards gender as linked to sexuality and to the other passions, and as such it properly belongs to the problematic 'tunics of skin' that the Fall introduced. Gender, then, is something to be overcome." Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15.

23. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Norris Jr. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 225. For the Greek text, see "In Canticum canticorum," in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 6, ed. Hermannus Langerbeck (Leiden: Brill, 1952–).

24. Karras, "Eschatology," 252.

25. Gregory of Nyssa, "On Virginity," trans. William Moore, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, vol. 5 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 343–71, 366. For the Greek text, see "De virginitate," in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 8, ed. J. P. Cavadon, 247–343.

26. For the chronology of Gregory's oeuvre, see Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 163–78.

27. Andrew Louth, "The Body in Western Catholic Christianity," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 115.

28. For the English translation of this passage of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*, PG 44, 185B–D, see Harrison, "Gregory of Nyssa on Human Unity and Diversity," 336. For the Greek text, see *De hominis opificio*, in *Patrologiae*

*Cursus completus*, Series Graecae, vol. XLIV, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris, 1857–1866) (hereinafter PG), 124–56.

29. Gregory, *De hominis opificio*, PG 44, 189C–D. English translation: *On the Making of Man*, trans. William Moore, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, vol. 5 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 406.

30. Valerie Karras, “Patristic Views on the Ontology of Gender,” in *Personhood: Orthodox Christianity and the Connection between Body, Mind, and Soul*, ed. John Chirban (London: Bergin & Garvey, 1996), 117.

31. Karras, “Sex/Gender,” 367.

32. Karras, “Sex/Gender,” 367.

33. The word “desire” translates a number of Greek words like *epithymia*, *eros*, *epheis*, *pothos*, *pathos*, and *oreksis*.

34. Susannah Cornwall, *Theology and Sexuality* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 2.

35. Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 6.

36. Gregory, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 131.

37. For Gregory’s theory of desire, see Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 62–70.

38. “In Regard to Those Fallen Asleep (De Mortuis, GNO 9),” in *One Path for All: Gregory of Nyssa on the Christian Life and Human Destiny*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015), 113. For the Greek text, see “De mortuis,” in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 9, ed. Gunterus Heil, 28–68.

39. John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 50–51.

40. Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10.

41. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. Anna M. Silvas, in *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008), 192. For the Greek text, see Gregory of Nyssa, “De anima et resurrectione,” PG, 46:12–160.

42. Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 10.

43. Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 11.

44. For Gregory’s account of the diachronic process of spiritual maturation, see Martin Laird, “Under Solomon’s Tutelage: The Education of Desire in the ‘Homilies of the Song of Songs,’” *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 (October 2002): 507–25 and Cadenhead, *Body and Desire*, 123–37.

45. With the term “soul” (Greek *ψυχή*), Gregory assumes both the immaterial and the material natures of human beings. For him, there is a distinction between soul and body but the soul does not exist prior to the body. The soul is related to the whole body and along with it constitutes the human being that is

created in the image and likeness of God. In this respect, one can replace the word “soul” for the word “person” or “human being.” For Gregory’s understanding of the soul, see his “De anima et resurrectione.”

46. Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*.

47. Mark Hart, “Reconciliation of Body and Soul: Gregory of Nyssa’s Deeper Theology of Marriage,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 450–78.

48. Coakley, *New Asceticism*, 30.

49. Gregory, “On Virginity,” 352.

50. Gregory, “On Virginity,” 353.

51. John Panteleimon Manoussakis, “Marriage and Sexuality in the Light of the Eschaton: A Dialogue between Orthodox and Reformed Theology,” *Religions* 7, no. 7 (July 2016): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7070089>.

52. Gregory, “On Virginity,” 359.

53. Coakley, *New Asceticism*, 30.

54. Gregory, “On Virginity,” 353.

55. John Behr, “The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa’s *De Hominis Opificio*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999): 246.

56. Valerie Karras, “A Re-evaluation of Marriage, Celibacy, and Irony in Gregory of Nyssa’s *On Virginity*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 13, no. 1 (2005): 120–21; and Coakley, *New Asceticism*, 50.

57. Karras, “A Re-evaluation of Marriage,” 121.

58. Gregory, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 341.

59. Gregory, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 341.

60. Gregory, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 29.

61. Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 342.

62. Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 310.