
BEING SPIRITUAL IN LIFE VICISSITUDES
- THE PRESENT TIME AND PERPETUAL SPIRITUAL JOURNEY
IN THE LIGHT OF GREGORY OF NYSSA'S MYSTICISM

在沉浮中保持灵修人生
在尼撒的贵格利神秘主义的指引下
开启现世和长久的灵修之旅

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ABSTRACT

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, we find ourselves living in a time of crisis. Our cultural and technological developments are being largely challenged. The pandemic tells us that the ultimate solution for all the problems we face is not in our own hands. God is where we find the final hope and salvation. In this regard, the present crisis may not be totally negative for our lives. To read the situation positively and even spiritually, we turn to the 4th-century Church Father Gregory of Nyssa, who is famous for his apophatic Mysticism. Viewing through the apophatic lens, the crisis has reminded us of the limitations of human intellectual power, which may turn our eyes to the final cause of the world, the ultimate meaning of life, and eventually what is essential for our final salvation. That is where we start our spiritual transformation anew.

Key Words

Spiritual transformation, Gregory of Nyssa, apophatic awakening

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, we find ourselves living in a time of crisis. We overturned our lifestyle in various aspects to protect ourselves before we reached the new scientific breakthrough. As pertinent as our actions are, something is missing in the whole scenario. Can we react to Covid 19 in other ways than the preventive actions we are taking now? Can we take Covid as an opportunity for meeting the real human situation, the divine power behind it, and eventually its spiritual transformation? In the early Church, when science and technology were not yet advanced as nowadays, we are more likely to sense the infinite distance between God and man, and so more concerning the spiritual growth. Church Fathers' ideas of spiritual transformation may give us another lens of looking at the pandemic crisis. In this paper, I will focus on one Church Father in the 4th century, Gregory of Nyssa, discussing his idea of spiritual transformation and how we can read Covid 19 in that light.

He saw Abraham's journey as an allegory of spiritual ascent. (Gregory of Nyssa, 2007, no. 86, p. 78) He regards Abraham as commending all the knowledge that is possible for the human intellect. Yet, when God calls Abraham, Abraham was "not knowing where he was going." (Ibid., no. 86, p. 79) For Gregory, knowledge does not bring Abraham an understanding of God, but instead, it brings the awareness that God is beyond all that he has known. It is upon this awareness that Abraham discards "anything comprehensible and desist from the journey towards things beyond knowing." (Ibid., no. 88. p. 79)

The apophatic awakening that prompts the spiritual transformation stands at the centre of Gregory's theology. The way he articulates it can also provide us with an apophatic reading of the medical science and the present crisis of Covid 19. Apophatism became the central theological theme for Gregory in his defence of the divinity of the Son in his polemics with Eunomius. Eunomius adopts a literal interpretation of Jesus'

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For Gregory, what leads one to spiritual transformation is the apophatic awakening, i.e., the moment when a person becomes aware of the limitation of human intellectual capacity in the face of the transcendence and incomprehensibility of God. He explains this clearly in his interpretation of Abraham's journey to the Promised Land. Like other Church Fathers of his time, Gregory used the allegorical approach to read the Bible.

words, such as "The Father is greater than me." (NRSV, Jn. 14:28), asserting that the Son is made by the Father as the first creature in the world.

Gregory identified Eunomius' main mistake as trying to grasp the essence of the Father/Son relationship by human intellect. To show that our mind is limited, in the second book against Eunomius, Gregory reviews what we as humans can know by our natural power,

such as how the planets/stars revolve alongside each other, and the movement of the sun and the moon from astronomy. But, he says, if we ask the question of the nature of the universe, that is why and how the universe would be as it is, we find that the answer does not lie in what we can observe, but “lies beyond the limits of human knowledge.” (Gregory of Nyssa, 2007, no. 79, p. 77) Here Gregory distinguishes two aspects of the existence of a thing: 1) the phenomena we can observe and know; 2) the nature of a thing in terms of why and how a thing exists as it is. The latter is beyond our understanding, since it is rooted in the final cause of the world, the Creator. This awareness leads Gregory to his apophatic perception of God: if we cannot understand the natures of created beings, even less likely for us to know the nature of God who granted each created being its nature. Gregory draws a radical distance between God as the Creator and the created world: “One is finite, the other infinite; the one is confined within its proper measure as the wisdom of its Maker determined, the limit of the other is infinity.” (Gregory of Nyssa, 2007, no. 70, p. 74) Insofar as the intra-Trinitarian relationship lies in the transcendental divine realm, it is totally beyond our intellectual grasp. For Gregory, this awareness does not stop us from inquiring about God, but instead prompts us to encounter God in a way radically different from our ordinary perception.

In the Apophatism just sketched, the division Gregory makes between intelligible phenomena and the unintelligible nature of created beings echoes the distinction between science and religion made by some 20th-century theologians (Cf. Garrigou-Lagrange, 1934, p. 63, McGrath, 1999): natural science deals with data retrieved from the phenomenal world by looking for connections between phenomena, and thereby it cannot answer the question of the essence and has no power over the fundamental relationships between man and the world, as well as man and God.

As one branch of natural science, medicine has a limited nature, which Covid 19 once again has revealed. No matter how advanced it is, medical science only modifies our relationship with the natural world based on the relationship it observed between phenomena, it cannot alter the nature of human life and the natural world given by God. Just as the invention of vaccines modified our relation with viruses, but it cannot change the fact that human beings are created as imperfect and vulnerable creatures whose lives face constant threats from other beings in the natural world. Covid 19 has testified that the threat has never been eliminated. A proper attitude towards medical achievements and natural threats should entail an apophatic awareness of human intellectual boundaries.

The apophatic awakening does not only invite spiritual transformation but determines its manner as well. Apophatism for Gregory is not a pure negation of any understanding of God. Instead, it is the understanding that God is beyond any attempt at grasping, be it negative (apophatic) or positive (cataphatic), so the way to get ever closer to the reality of God is to maximise the various ways of talking and experiencing God. Rather than holding us back from pursuing God, Apophatism pushes us to seek more positive knowledge of Him continuously through spiritual transformation. Spiritual transformation as such means, first of all, an immediate participation in the divine life by means of living a virtuous life according to the teaching of the Church. Gregory holds the Platonic idea that knowing virtues is to live them out. In the light of Gen 1:26, he was convinced that virtues are the likeness between human beings and God, and thereby though the nature of God is incomprehensible, we can know divine attributes such as virtues by practicing them. (Gregory of Nyssa, 2000, 70; Cf. Smith, 2004, 25-27, 163, 196; Balás, 152-57) This way of knowing God is more immediate than intellectual knowledge, since it is to directly participate in the divine life. (Cf. Harrison, 1995, part 1)

Intellectually, spiritual transformation in this sense requires us to constantly move beyond the boundary of the mind. (Cf. Louth, 2007, pp. 78-94) It will result in a unique epiphanic experience of God much more intense than simply living out virtues. In Gregory's exegesis of Moses' journey to the Promised Land, he interprets Moses entering the dark cloud on Mount Sinai (NRSV, Ex. 20, 21) as an apophatic experience of "leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees." (Gregory of Nyssa, 1978, II, 163; see also Gregory of Nyssa, 2007, no. 88, p. 79) In penetrating more deeply into the divine darkness while discarding all senses and reason, Moses gains a positive experience of seeing God in not seeing (Gregory of Nyssa, 1978, II, 163). The paradoxical expression serves as "a block to reason" (Laird, 2004, 85) to highlight that the encounter with God is in some way radically different from the ordinary knowing. Some scholars interpret the encounter as the Divine dwelling in the soul (Laird, 2004, 86). It involves an immediacy with God achieved by means of faith or participation. (Harrison, 1995, pp. 66-69; Laird, 2004, 82-85)

sensual or intelligible perception, but a perception that "escapes clear and distinct intellectual grasp." (Ibid.) Thus it is a feeling of God's presence that is beyond description. For Gregory, we can only speak about the spiritual transformation negatively due to its transcendental nature. In action, what we can do is to keep desiring what faith reveals while discarding all understanding, knowing God is radically different from what we have known. Only then will God draw the soul beyond comprehension, who is desiring with a sense of His presence. This does not gainsay all our intellectual endeavours in the world. Instead, it requires us to anchor our lives not in our understandings, but in the One who is beyond our intellectual grasp. Thus spiritual transformation should be the ground of our lives and all our actions in the world.

Yet, it is not easy to strive for spiritual transformation, since it radically opposes our ordinary way of knowing, and impressive scientific achievements constantly blur our vision. In Gregory's writings, apophatic vision is often awakened by an intellectual failure. In *Against Eunomius* II, Gregory sees Abraham exemplifying those who came to the apophatic

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Gregory is not specific about the positive content of spiritual transformation. The most direct term that alludes to it is "some perception of His presence" in his homilies on the *Song of Songs*. (Gregory of Nyssa, 2013, p. 343) It is not a

awareness because they were "walking by faith and not by sight." (Gregory of Nyssa, 2007, no. 86, p. 78). In the context of the Trinitarian debate, Gregory contrasts faith and sight to stress that what prompts apophatic awareness has to be

some truth that besetting lies beyond reason, and the mystery of the Trinity is precisely one of this kind. In *Life of Moses*, when interpreting Moses' theophany in the divine darkness, Gregory sees that it is the negative experience of knowing that "what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension" (Gregory of Nyssa, 1978, II,164) moved Moses to penetrate further into the divine mystery by discarding sensual and intellectual perceptions.

Regarding our present situation, can we also take Covid 19 positively as an opportunity for apophatic awakening? By revealing the inadequacies of our current protective systems, Covid 19 reminds us that our intelligence may have the power to protect us from the attack of viruses, but it cannot alter our essential relationship with the natural world, which lies in the very nature of human beings. If we take the revelation positively as such, it may awaken our eyes to the final cause that determines our nature, the Creator, and leads us to keep anchoring our lives in our relationship with the almighty One through spiritual transformation.

Accepted in the light of Gregory's Apophatism, intellectual failures are not accidental, but may be God's way of keeping us focused on spiritual transformation. Due to the infinite distance between God and us, God is always infinitely far beyond us, no matter how much we have progressed in spiritual transformation. Here we can learn from Gregory's idea of *epektasis*, which asserts that our spiritual transformation will entail perpetual progress that continues even after the end of this life. (Louth, 2007, p. 86-88; Smith, 2004, pp. 115-25) To ensure that progress goes on continuously, God would constantly put us in situations that can arouse our apophatic awareness. Gregory explored this idea in his interpretation of Moses seeing Yahweh's back in the cleft of a rock (NRSV, Ex.33:22). The theophany comes in the context of Moses yearning to see God face to face. But instead of showing Moses his face directly, Yahweh asked

Moses to go into a hole of a rock, where Moses saw Yahweh's back while Yahweh was passing by. (NRSV, Ex.33:23) Gregory thinks that Yahweh showing Moses his back instead of his face is to put Moses to despair so that in the apophatic experience of not seeing, Moses can continue chasing God in a way that is beyond seeing and understanding. (Gregory of Nyssa, 1978, II,219-227) This manner of God's interaction with us also reflects the bride's experience in the *Song of Songs*. In the dark night where nothing is visible, the bridegroom grants the bride a sense of his own presence, which is not an intelligible vision, but a feeling which arouses the bride's awareness of the infinite gap between what the bride has known of the bridegroom and who he really is, and this experience pushes the bride to keep searching for her love by discarding what she has known of him. (Laird, 2004, p. 85)

As Gregory understands it, God constantly puts us in despair to awaken us to our intellectual limits and lead us to the transcendent way of knowing Him beyond seeing and knowing. Viewed in this light, can Covid 19 and all other vicissitudes in our lives be allowed by God so that we can take them as opportunities for apophatic awakening and spiritual transformation? As much as our desire to control everything by our intellectual power, the uncertainties that frustrate such ambition never stop coming back. Viewed from a transcendent perspective, they definitely have some positive meanings, not simply in stimulating greater scientific and technological achievements, but more in inviting us to keep ourselves anchored in Him and moving forward toward spiritual transformation. All that requires us to stop panicking and take a positive look at the crises as we respond to them.



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