

Ascension of an Immaterial Body

*With Contributions from Nicholas of Cusa,
Jonathan Edwards, and Gregory of Nyssa*

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In the year 1454, the German theologian Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) sent a twofold gift of encouragement to the monks of the Benedictine community at Tegernsee: a newly penned book of his, *De visione Dei*, along with an icon, likely of the face of Christ.³⁷ At the beginning of his treatise, Cusa asks the monks to engage in an experiment:

I am sending, to your charity, a painting that I was able to acquire containing an all-seeing image, which I call an icon of God.

Hang this up some place, perhaps on a north wall. And you brothers stand around it, equally distant from it, and gaze at it. And each of you will experience that from whatever place one observes it the face will seem to regard him alone. To a brother standing in the east, the face will look eastward; to one in the south, it will look southward; and to one in the west, westward. First, therefore, you will marvel at how it is possible that the face looks on all and each one of you at the same time. . . . Next, let the brother who was in the east place himself in the west, and he will experience the gaze as fastened on him there just as it was before in the east. Since he knows that the icon is fixed and unchanged, he will marvel at the changing of its unchangeable gaze.³⁸

Nicholas draws attention to the fact that no matter where a monk may place himself with respect to the icon, the face depicted in it appears to look at him directly. Of course, as both Cusa and the Benedictine monks are aware, in reality the Christ figure looks not just on one individual, but on every

37. Most of the material in this essay appeared in a variant form in Hans Boersma, *Seeing God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), chapter 14.

38. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, preface. All translations of Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, are from *Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. and ed. H. Lawrence Bond (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997)

one of the monks at the same time, regardless of where they place themselves in relation to the icon. With this experiment, Cusa draws our attention to the meticulous and loving providential care of God for each and every one of us.

In this response to Fr. Behr's chapter, I will attempt to provide support for one of its main arguments, namely, that the Origenist spiritualizing tendency and the Irenaean incarnational approach are not opposed to one another but share an eschatology that regards temporal and spatial realities as being in need of transformation so as to be fitted for the eschaton. I have long been convinced that it is not only Irenaeus who—against all gnostifying of God's good creation—had a high view of embodiment, but that all the required ingredients for a positive evaluation of the body are present in the Christian Platonist tradition of East and West. It is not only Irenaeus but also the tradition following in the footsteps of Origen in the East and of Augustine in the West that maintained that Christ had bodily ascended to the right hand of the Father and that his ascended body is the firstfruits and guarantee of our bodily resurrection on the day of judgment.³⁹ We need the Christian Platonism that has characterized much of the tradition, in order to provide proper theological and metaphysical support for the doctrine of the ascension as well as for a proper understanding of embodiment and creation more broadly understood.

I don't know whether Fr. Behr will welcome my Christian Platonist support of his argument that Irenaeus's and Origen's approaches are complementary rather than contradictory. My thesis goes beyond what he argues in his chapter; in particular, I will look to the idealist tradition of Christian Platonism to defend the spiritualizing tendency of the Origenists, and Fr. Behr may or may not follow me in this. The view I will put forward is that expressed by Nicholas of Cusa and others in the Christian Platonist tradition, namely, that it is God's gaze in Christ that lovingly calls creation into being and sustains it in its created form, both in this temporal life and in the future resurrection. Whatever Fr. Behr's stance may be on this, on the idealist understanding of matter, or on the Christian Platonist tradition within which this idealism has its place, my overriding point is the following: An idealist view of matter, which lies deeply embedded within Christian Platonism, allows us to view

39. It seems to me that Douglas Farrow's disjunction of the Irenaean incarnational approach and the Origenist spiritualizing tendency does not do proper justice to the incarnational element that characterizes almost all of the Christian tradition. See my review of Douglas Farrow's *Ascension Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011) in *First Things*, August/September 2011, 62–63.

the Origenist and Irenaean approaches as complementary rather than contradictory, which is one of the key points Fr. Behr makes in his chapter. And I will add the further corollary that this metaphysical understanding of creation provides us with an invaluable tool in defense of the embodied character of the ascension and hence of the resurrection of the body—though it entails a view of matter and of the body that radically rejects the modern seclusion of the natural, material order as something independent and separate from the life of God in Jesus Christ.

It is with good reason that Nicholas of Cusa asked the monks of Tegernsee to subject themselves to the gaze of Christ. He was convinced that it is only God's vision that sustains our embodied being. After a few introductory chapters, Nicholas turns his treatise into the form of a prayer, and he addresses the God who looks on him (as well as on the monks of Tegernsee):

Lord, in this image of you I now behold your providence by a certain sensible experience. For if you do not abandon me, the vilest of all, you will never abandon anyone. . . . By no imagining, Lord, do you allow me to conceive that you love anything other than me more than me, for it is I alone that your gaze does not abandon. And since the eye is there wherever love is, I experience that you love me because your eyes rest most attentively on me, your humble servant. Your seeing, Lord, is your loving.⁴⁰

Cusa is enthralled with God's vision of himself and of all reality. God's face is a face whose "eye reaches all things without turning" and in so doing loves all things.⁴¹ This love of God causes Cusa in turn to love God. It feeds him and kindles his desires, so that he drinks of the dew of gladness, which becomes a "fountain of life" inside him.⁴² The end result of God's seeing is the communication of immortality and, thus, "eternal happiness."⁴³

For Nicholas, the *visio Dei* of the title of his book is, in the first place, a subjective genitive. It speaks of God's all-seeing, unchangeable gaze of hu-

40. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* 4.9–10.

41. In typically Platonic fashion, Cusa maintains that God always and only looks on us in providential love and mercy, communicating to us immortality and happiness. When we miss out on the loving glance of God it is not because God is not looking on us in love but simply because by our free will we have decided to look away from his face. Thus Nicholas comments that God never changes his eyes or his gaze: "If you do not look upon me with the eye of grace, I am at fault because I have separated myself from you by turning away toward some other, which I prefer to you" (*On the Vision of God* 5.14). Similarly, Nicholas suggests: "And the more one strives to look on you with greater love, the more loving will one find your face. Whoever looks on you with anger will likewise find your face angry" (*On the Vision of God* 6.19).

42. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* 4.12.

43. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* 4.12.

manity in love and mercy. To be sure, the treatise also speaks of our vision of God, but on Nicholas's understanding, our vision of God is invariably predicated on his vision of us.⁴⁴ We cannot see God without his first seeing us. In fact, since Nicholas explicitly identifies God's gaze with his providential love, it would not be too far of a stretch to suggest that Nicholas believed in a *creatio continua* of sorts, in which the created order perdures only inasmuch as it is upheld by the loving gaze of God.⁴⁵ Cusa confesses: "I exist only inasmuch as you are with me. And since your seeing is your being, therefore, because you regard me, I am, and if you remove your face from me, I will cease to be."⁴⁶ Our vision of God is always only in response to God's vision of us. Put differently, if God's vision of the world is the emanation of creation from the being of God, our vision of him constitutes our deifying return to him.

Nicholas discusses also the vision we have of God. He bases it in the beauty of the face of God, which attracts our loving gaze: "Every face has beauty, but none is beauty itself. Your face, Lord, has beauty, and this having is being. It is thus absolute beauty itself, which is the form that gives being to every form of beauty. O immeasurably lovely Face, your beauty is such that all things to which are granted to behold it are not sufficient to admire it."⁴⁷ God's face, according to Nicholas, is beauty itself. We see this "face of faces" in veiled fashion by looking into the faces of those around us.⁴⁸

44. Cf. Jean-Luc Marion's comment: "Je peux bien dire que je vois Dieu, mais cela ne se peut que si Dieu, ce Dieu qui reste un Dieu caché, me le concède; et il ne donne d'être vu par quelqu'un d'autre, qu'en le lui donnant, donc en voyant lui-même et d'abord ce quelqu'un qui, alors, éventuellement le verra. Il faut pour qu'un visage voie le visage de Dieu, que se visage, Dieu le tourne d'abord vers ceux qui le regardent" ("I may well say that I see God, but this can only be if God, this God who remains a hidden God, grants it to me. And he only lets himself be seen by someone else by giving himself to him, so by himself first seeing this someone who will thus eventually see him. For a face to see the face of God, God must first turn this face towards those who look at him") ("Voir, se voir vu: L'Apport de Nicolas de Cues dans le *De visione Dei*," *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 117, no. 2 [April 2016]: 7–37, at 18–19).

45. Marion notes that for Nicholas of Cusa God's gaze is always already a loving gaze: "L'intentionnalité [du regard de Dieu] n'aboutit pas à l'objectivité, ni ne vise un objet, mais déploie l'amour et vise un aimé, qui peut alors devenir en retour un amant" ("The intentionality [of the gaze of God] does not lead to 'objecthood,' nor does it aim at an object, but extends love and aims at a beloved, who can then in turn become a lover") ("Voir, se voir vu," 35).

46. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* 4.10. Cusa similarly comments a little later: "Your seeing is nothing other than your bringing to life, nothing other than your continuously imparting your sweetest love" (*On the Vision of God* 4.12). Again, he states: "You are visible by all creatures and you see all. In that you see all you are seen by all. For otherwise creatures cannot exist since they exist by your vision. If they did not see you who see, they would not receive being from you. The being of a creature is equally your seeing and your being seen" (*On the Vision of God* 10.40).

47. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* 4.10.

48. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* 4.10.

But the eye seeks to see the light that is beyond all visible light. As a result, the eye "knows that so long as it sees anything, what it sees is not what it is seeking."⁴⁹ Only when we enter into the cloud—a picture derived from the Christian Platonist tradition reaching back via Dionysius to Gregory of Nyssa—do we see the invisible light of the beauty of God: "The denser, therefore, one knows the cloud to be the more one truly attains to the invisible light in the cloud."⁵⁰ For Nicholas of Cusa, the notion of "invisible light" bespeaks the recognition that God can be found only after we willingly enter into the cloud and in doing so acknowledge what Cusa terms the "coincidence of opposites" (*coincidentia oppositorum*)—the deeper the obscurity of the cloud, the more clearly we see the brilliance of the light of God's face.⁵¹

The eighteenth-century Reformed philosopher-theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) had a theological and metaphysical approach similar to that of Nicholas of Cusa. I have no evidence that Edwards was actually familiar with Cusa's treatment of the beatific vision. Nonetheless, had he read Cusa's *De visione Dei*, I suspect he would have been enthralled by it. Edwards's own theological approach, like that of Cusa, was deeply grounded in the Christian Platonist tradition, probably mostly as a result of his reading of the Cambridge Platonists. The result is that Edwards, too, thought of the beatific vision as being caught up in God's loving gaze on us. For Edwards, as for Cusa, the beatific vision means that we enter ever more gloriously into the light of God's face.⁵² It is hardly surprising that previous scholarship

49. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* 6.21.

50. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* 6.21.

51. Cf. Nicholas's comment: "I admit that darkness is light, ignorance knowledge, and the impossible necessary. . . . We are admitting, therefore, the coincidence of contradictories, above which is the infinite. But this coincidence is a contradiction without contradiction, and it is an end without end" (*On the Vision of God* 13.53). It is important to recall that for Nicholas this vision of God is presented in a profoundly trinitarian and christological fashion—and here he clearly advances beyond Dionysius. Moving inside the cloud (or beyond the wall of the coincidence of opposites), the believer enters Paradise, where he encounters Jesus as the Tree of Life. Turning to him in prayer, Nicholas writes, "O Jesus, you are the Tree of Life in the paradise of delights. For none can be fed by that desirable life except from your fruit. . . . Just as everyone is bound to you, O Jesus, by a human nature common to oneself and to you, so one must also be united to you in one spirit in order that thus in one's nature, which is common with you, Jesus, one can draw near to God, the Father, who is in paradise. Therefore, to see God the Father and you, Jesus, his Son, is to be in paradise and everlasting glory. For outside paradise one cannot have such a vision since neither God, the Father, nor you, Jesus, are able to be found outside paradise. Therefore, every human being who has attained happiness is united to you, O Jesus, as a member is united to its head" (*On the Vision of God* 21.92).

52. This is not to deny obvious (and significant) differences between Edwards and Cusa. For Edwards, the history of redemption takes on much greater prominence than for Cusa. Edwards's theology of vision does not use the "cloud" language of the apophatic tradition (and does not revel in its paradoxical

has detected similarities between Edwards and Maximus the Confessor as well as between Edwards and Gregory Palamas.⁵³ The similarities are genuine in my opinion, as are the similarities with regard to the vision of God between Cusa and Edwards, because the Puritan pastor deliberately grounded his theology within the patristic and Neoplatonic traditions.

One statement of Cusa, in particular, would have held great appeal to Jonathan Edwards: "In that you see all you are seen by all. For otherwise creatures cannot exist since they exist by your vision."⁵⁴ For Edwards, as for Cusa, the creature exists only by God's vision. Our existence from moment to moment is the result of being seen by God. Edwards, like Cusa, was convinced that it is only in and through divine perception that created reality has being. As he puts it in his "Notes on Knowledge and Existence": "All existence is perception. What we call body is nothing but a particular mode of perception; and what we call spirit is nothing but a composition and series of perceptions, or an universe of coexisting and successive perceptions connected by such wonderful methods and laws."⁵⁵ The result is that, for Edwards, the only substance that truly exists is God himself. As Edwards comments in his notebook "Of Atoms": "The substance of bodies at last becomes either nothing, or nothing but the Deity acting in that particular manner in those parts of space where he thinks fit. So that, speaking most strictly, there is no proper substance but God himself (we speak at present with respect to bodies only). How truly, then, is he said to be *ens entium* [being of beings]."⁵⁶ Put differently, for Edwards, there are no created substances apart from the one substance that only and truly exists, namely, God himself. On Edwards's understanding, only the idealist notion that "to be is to be perceived" (*esse est percipi*) would suffice to counter properly

language). For Edwards, unlike for Cusa, the beatific vision is not just spiritual but also bodily in character (see Hans Boersma, "The 'Grand Medium': An Edwardsean Modification of Thomas Aquinas on the Beatific Vision." *Modern Theology* 33, no. 2 [2016]: 187–212). Furthermore, Edwards's occasionalism makes him resistant to free will, whereas for Cusa it is precisely free will that causes us to turn away from the vision of God and lapse into nonbeing.

53. See Michael Gibson, "The Beauty of the Redemption of the World: The Theological Aesthetics of Maximus the Confessor and Jonathan Edwards," *Harvard Theological Review* 101, no. 1 (2008): 45–76; Michael J. McClymond, "Salvation as Divinization: Jonathan Edwards, Gregory Palamas and the Theological Uses of Neoplatonism," in *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian*, ed. Paul Helm and Oliver Crisp (Burlington, VT.: Ashgate, 2003), 139–60.

54. Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God* 10.40.

55. Jonathan Edwards, "Notes on Knowledge and Existence," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (hereafter cited as *WJE*), vol. 6, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 378.

56. Jonathan Edwards, "Of Atoms," *WJE* 6:215.

the baleful impact of materialism. For Edwards, matter simply doesn't exist, except in the sense that God's loving gaze continually calls forth the ideas of his mind. The notion of a material substance, a substratum that underlies the properties that we perceive with the senses, seemed nonsensical to Edwards.

Edwards staunchly opposed the materialism of Thomas Hobbes, which to many in the eighteenth century held great appeal. To Edwards, it was not adequate to counter materialism by resorting to a division of reality into form and matter. Edwards would have regarded Aristotelian hylomorphism as incapable of countering the materialism of modernity. For Edwards, Thomas Aquinas would have been far too Aristotelian. Aquinas, following the Stagirite on this score, had emphasized the importance of sense perception and had treated empirical objects as consisting of substance and accidents. As a result, he had argued by way of analogy from empirical sense data to the existence of God. Edwards nearly turned this Thomist approach to analogy upside down. William S. Morris puts it as follows:

Edwards argued that rationally we must conceive of God as substance, and argue by analogy from God to the creature. For the creature exists only in God, and the substantiality of any material thing is only substance by participation. Edwards argued from reason and idea to sense, not from sense to reason and idea. He argued from the creator to the creature, not from the creature to the creator. We know the shadow by the substance, and not the substance from the shadow. Spirit is substance, and body is shadow. In metaphysics, reason argues *to* sense, rather than *from* sense. God is known immediately, not mediately and by inference.⁵⁷

One may or may not agree that idealism implies the rejection of Thomas's doctrine of analogy. One may well argue that also with idealist and Platonist convictions, it is possible to argue rationally from the shadows to the substance. Still, Morris's overall point is well taken: for Edwards, the creature only has existence in God, and Edwards's metaphysics was deeply influenced by Platonic assumptions, one of which is the immateriality of empirically observable realities. Morris puts it well when he comments: "If he [Edwards] had had to choose between Plato and Aristotle for philosophic mentor, he would politely have turned aside from the Stagirite."⁵⁸

Since Edwards holds that creation exists from moment to moment sim-

57. William Sparkes Morris, *The Young Jonathan Edwards: A Reconstruction* (New Haven: Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 427–28.

58. Morris, *Young Jonathan Edwards*, 428.

ply by being perceived, the created order does not have independent stability for him. Created beings are constantly in flux, and it is only through God's sovereign and loving gaze that created things have continuity in their being. Creation, explains Seng-Kong Tan, is for Edwards a "continuous *ex nihilo* operation."⁵⁹ Created entities have their being only in God's *creatio continua*, that is to say, in his continuous perception of them. Edwards—and on this point he undoubtedly differed from Nicholas of Cusa—grounded his metaphysical idealism in his deeply held Calvinist conviction of the sovereignty of God. It is only the will of God, according to Edwards, that allows for the continuity of created objects and for the stability and reliability of the world around us: "When I call this an arbitrary constitution, I mean, that it is a constitution which depends on nothing but the divine will; which *divine will* depends on nothing but the *divine wisdom*. In this sense, the whole course of nature, with all that belongs to it, all its laws and methods, and constancy and regularity, continuance and proceeding, is an *arbitrary constitution*."⁶⁰

Oliver Crisp rightly terms Edwards's approach *occasionalist*, meaning that God "continually creates the world *ex nihilo* moment-by-moment" and that "God is the only causal act in the world," so that "creaturely 'acts' are merely the 'occasions' of God's activity."⁶¹ Crisp compares God's continuous creation in Edwards to watching a movie:

When watching a movie at the cinema we appear to see a sequence of actions across time represented in the projected images on the silver screen. But in reality, the images are a reel of photographic stills run together at speed to give the illusion of motion and action across time. Similarly with occasionalism: the world seems to persist through time, but in fact it does not. "The world" (meaning here, the created cosmos) is merely shorthand for that series of created "stills"—that is, the complete, maximal, but momentary states of affairs—God brings about in sequence, playing, as it were on the silver screen of the divine mind.⁶²

By closely linking his immaterialist metaphysics to his Calvinist occasionalism, Edwards devised a rather distinctive version of idealism. After all,

59. Seng-Kong Tan, "Jonathan Edwards's Dynamic Idealism and Cosmic Christology," in *Idealism and Christian Theology*, ed. Joshua R. Farris, S. Mark Hamilton, and James S. Spiegel, *Idealism and Christianity 1* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 239.

60. Jonathan Edwards, *WJE*, vol. 3, *Original Sin*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 403; italics original. Cf. Tan, "Jonathan Edwards's Dynamic Idealism," 241.

61. Oliver D. Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards's Ontology: A Critique of Sang Hyun Lee's Dispositional Account of Edwardsian Metaphysics," *Religious Studies* 46, no. 1 (2010): 1–20, at 10.

62. Crisp, "Jonathan Edwards's Ontology," 10.

we encounter other forms of idealism in earlier Christian Platonists such as Gregory of Nyssa and Nicholas of Cusa. Neither of them lapsed into the monergism that characterizes Edwards's thought. To be sure, Edwards's idealism and his occasionalism make for a logical fit, but the Christian Platonist background of immaterialism suggests that idealism does not necessarily entail occasionalism.

To my knowledge Edwards never connected his idealist view of matter with questions of the ascension of Christ or of the body's eternal future. Some have hinted that Edwards may have seen some connection between his idealism and his eschatology. Robert Caldwell suggests that "Edwards's reflections on the 'physics' of heaven and the nature of the saints' glorified bodies there remain some of the most fascinating (if not the most speculative) reflections in all of his writings."⁶³ Indeed, Edwards speculates, for instance, that in heaven the bodily senses will allow the saints to converse with people at "a thousand miles' distance."⁶⁴ The bodies of the saints will be attuned, maintains Edwards, to every physical pleasure, though in such a way that this pleasure will contribute also to spiritual pleasure.⁶⁵ These eschatological musings certainly make for interesting reading. And though Edwards nowhere provides a metaphysical underpinning for these eschatological observations, it seems to me he easily could have done so. In the remainder of this chapter I will suggest that it is precisely his idealist view of matter that would have provided him with a framework for these eschatological speculations with regard to the body and sense perception.

In order to make this argument, I will turn briefly to the fourth-century Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 394), who as a Christian Platonist was deeply influenced by Origen, and whose view of matter—and of the human body in particular—was quite similar to the later understanding of Jonathan Edwards. To be sure, Nyssen never argued that that to be is to be perceived. In that sense, the icon's gaze would not have held the same theological significance for him as it later did for Nicholas of Cusa and for Jonathan Edwards. Nonetheless, Gregory of Nyssa, like Edwards, was an immaterialist, and he developed the implications of his metaphysics specifically with regard to the human body, as he recognized the possibilities

63. Robert Caldwell, "A Brief History of Heaven in the Writings of Jonathan Edwards," *Calvin Theological Journal* 46, no. 1 (2011): 48–71, at 66.

64. Edwards, "Miscellanies" No. 263, in *WJE*, vol. 13, *The "Miscellanies," a–500*, ed. Harry S. Stout (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 369. Cf. Caldwell, "Brief History of Heaven," 6.

65. Edwards, "Miscellanies" No. 233, in *WJE* 13:350–51. Cf. Caldwell, "Brief History of Heaven," 67.

that his immaterialism held out for an articulation of the resurrection of the body.

Gregory, much like Edwards, regarded the human body as fluid and malleable. Its characteristics could, and did, change over time. As he struggled to restrain his emotions at his sister Macrina's deathbed, he recognized that his saintly sister's body had begun to take on angelic form: "It was as if by some dispensation an angel had assumed a human form, with whom, not having any kinship or affinity with the life of the flesh, it was not at all unreasonable that the mind should remain in an unperturbed state, since the flesh did not drag it down to its own passions."⁶⁶ His sister, he insists, was rapidly losing her gendered character on her deathbed: "The subject of the tale was a woman—if indeed she was a 'woman,' for I know not whether it is fitting to designate her of that nature who so surpassed nature."⁶⁷ Gregory's destabilizing of his sister's gender does not turn her from a woman into a man. Nyssen proposes instead that bodily gender does not have ultimate, eschatological significance. He considered his sister's virtue to be of such an exalted character that he observed in her the realization of the Lord's promise that we will be like the angels (Lk 20:35–36). Gender differentiation, for Gregory, is something that only fits our postlapsarian situation, which is a life of food and drink, sexual activity, the passions more broadly, as well as mortality.⁶⁸ The resurrection body—angelic in character as it is—is not characterized by any of this.

Gregory's insistence on the fluidity of gender is the direct result both of his Christology and—immediately linked to it—his understanding of virtue. Nyssen refuses to give autonomy to the natural world of our postlapsarian state. Our bodies—the "tunics of hide" of Genesis 3:21 to which Gregory repeatedly alludes—do not have the kind of stability that our modern concept of *pura natura* might cause us to expect. Bodies as we know them today are deeply compromised as a result of the fall, and it is only when they are reconfigured in Christ that they take on their proper identity as God meant

66. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Macrina*, in Anna M. Silvas, *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God, Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts* 22 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 132.

67. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, 110.

68. To be sure, Gregory does explain in *On the Making of Man* that already in Paradise God created human beings as male and female, but God did so because he foreknew the fall and wanted Adam and Eve to be prepared for their postlapsarian mode of existence. See Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 17.4, in NPNF² 5:407 (quotations of this work are from this source); Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 100–109.

them to be. That is to say, it is the christological telos that determines, for Gregory, the true identity of the human body. The christological eschaton, not some observable, purely natural order, tells us what the body is meant to be. Therefore, when Nyssen explains the proverbial saying that the young man must embrace the feminine figure of wisdom (Prv 4:8), he insists with an appeal to Galatians 3:28 that the gendered language of Proverbs 4 must not be taken literally: "It is clear that the eagerness for this kind of marriage is common to men and women alike, for since, as the apostle says, 'There is neither male nor female,' and Christ is all things for all human beings, the true lover of wisdom has as his goal the divine One who is true wisdom, and the soul, clinging to its incorruptible Bridegroom, has a love of true wisdom which is God."⁶⁹ The human body will be reconfigured in the hereafter so as to be conformed to Christ. It is a transformation that will involve the loss of gender, but emphatically not of the body. The body—though changed—will find its ultimate destiny in the fullness (πλήρωμα) of Christ.⁷⁰

Gregory maintains that this bodily transformation hinges on growth in virtue. It is his admiration for his sister Macrina's saintly character that makes him recognize that she has undergone a physical transformation from a female to an angelic body. Similarly, in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Nyssen maintains that when through a life of virtue we more and more identify with Christ, we actually "put him on," as Saint Paul words it (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10).⁷¹ Along with the bride of the Song, we take off the postlapsarian tunic of hide (Song 5:3), and replace it with the garment of Christ:

Whoever has taken off the old humanity and rent the veil of the heart has opened an entrance for the Word. And when the Word has entered her, the soul makes him her garment [ἔνδυμα] in accordance with the instruction of the apostle; for he commands the person who has taken off the rags of the old humanity "to put on the new" tunic that "has been created after the likeness of God in holiness and righteousness" (Eph 4:24); and he says that this garment [ἔνδυμα] is Jesus (cf. Rom 13:14).⁷²

69. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 20.328.2–9, in Virginia Woods Callahan, trans., *Ascetical Works, Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1967), 64.

70. Gregory links the fullness (πλήρωμα) of Christ with the creation of "man" in the image of God (Gn 1:27a). He distinguishes this universal, christological "man" from the provisional creation of human beings as "male and female" (Gn 1:27b). See Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 16.8–9. See Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 104–5.

71. For more detail, see Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 87–92.

72. *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 11, in Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. and ed. Richard A. Norris, *Writings from the Greco-Roman World* 13 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 347.

Jesus is the new garment that replaces the tunics of hide that God gave human beings after the fall (Gn 3:21), and we put on this new tunic through a life of holiness and righteousness. As we become like Christ (in virtue), we put on Christ as our new garment, so that our postlapsarian bodily constitution changes. In other words, for Gregory it is not only the case that a change can be observed in our virtues, but the change involves an actual physiological transformation. Putting on Christ means, for Gregory, that we replace the fallen, passible life with the eschatological impassible existence that becomes ours in and through identification with Christ. As they identify with Christ, human beings undergo an ontological—and this implies for Gregory also a physical—change in their bodily makeup.

This bodily change—effected in Christ through a life of virtue—is possible, for Gregory, inasmuch as he holds lightly to the continuity of matter. Peter Bouteneff rightly observes that for Gregory, “the difference between the body’s coarseness in the present life, and the ‘lighter fibres’ with which our body will be spun in the resurrection . . . rests within the moral realm. For Gregory conceives of matter itself as essentially formless, not to say immaterial.”⁷³ Like Edwards would later do, so Gregory here appeals to the divine will as that which makes it possible for material objects to come into being out of nothing.⁷⁴ Saint Gregory maintains that there is nothing material that underlies the various properties of an object that we perceive by means of the senses: “If, then, colour is a thing intelligible, and resistance also is intelligible, and so with quantity and the rest of the properties, while if each of these should be withdrawn from the substratum, the whole idea of the body is dissolved; it would seem to follow that we may suppose the concurrence of those things, the absence of which we found to be the cause of the dissolution of the body, to produce the material nature.”⁷⁵ For Gregory, what we call “matter” is simply the convergence of a bunch of properties, which themselves are intelligible, not material.⁷⁶ Such an idealist

73. Peter C. Bouteneff, “The Problem of the Body in the Anthropology of St. Gregory of Nyssa,” in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes: An English Version with Supporting Studies: Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Paderborn, 14–18 September 1998)*, ed. Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano, *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 418.

74. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 23.5.

75. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 24.2.

76. Cf. James S. Spiegel, “The Theological Orthodoxy of Berkeley’s Immaterialism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (1996): 216–35; Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (1983; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 290–91; Stephen H. Daniel, “Berkeley’s Christian Neoplatonism, Archetypes, and Divine Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (2001): 239–58; Kirill Zinkovskiy, “St Gregory of Nyssa on the Transformation of Physical

view of matter allows for an eschatological view of the body as something rather ethereal, reconstituted in angelic form in the nongendered fullness of Christ.

As I already mentioned, Gregory did not ground the malleability of the body in God’s contemplation of human beings the way that Edwards did. Nor did Gregory’s synergistic approach to virtue allow for the Calvinist occasionalism of Edwards’s idealism. And unlike Gregory, Edwards never linked his immaterialist metaphysic with his speculations regarding the expanded possibilities of sense perception in heaven. It is not clear to me why he did not do so. As our excursus on Gregory of Nyssa’s theology illustrates, Edwards’s immaterialism could have been of great metaphysical support for his eschatological speculation. In particular, immaterialism allows one to hold on to the Irenaean incarnational approach—and so to the confession that it is Christ’s actual body that is in heaven at the right hand of the Father, as well as to the confession of our own bodily resurrection in and through him—in combination with the spiritualizing tendencies of Gregory of Nyssa and others. For Gregory, the heavenly reality of the eschaton necessitates a spiritualizing of the body. But it is not a spiritualizing that leaves the body behind. Instead, it is a spiritualizing that is predicated on the continuation of the body, transformed and made perfect in the eschatological reality of Jesus Christ. Or, as Nicholas of Cusa might have put it, it is when God’s vision of us in Jesus Christ transforms us—body and soul—that even our physical senses are healed, so as to obtain powers of contemplation such as “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined” (1 Cor 2:9 ESV). The ascension of Christ, on this understanding, was truly a bodily ascension. But the body is no longer conceived of in modern terms, as a self-sustained, independent entity that continues uninterrupted through time—and perhaps into eternity—unaffected by the loving gaze of God in Christ. Instead, the body is a fluid, malleable convergence of intelligible properties conceived and perceived by God, in and through Christ, and brought to its perfection through participation in him.

Elements—in Nature and Holy Eucharistic Gifts,” in *The Beauty of God’s Presence in the Fathers of the Church: The Proceedings of the Eighth International Patristic Conference, Maynooth, 2012*, ed. Janet Elaine Rutherford (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 150–60.

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