Bodily Presence Beyond Death: Venerating Relics with St Gregory of Nyssa

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[0:00] Greetings from St. Peter's Fireside. We're your daughter church, as you know. We are coming close to a year and a half. This recorder is working now. We've got two there.

Okay, double. I feel like this is a press release or something. Things are going well. We actually had a strategic planning staff and trustee retreat this weekend.

So we were looking at some survey data we recently collected about the congregation. It's very promising. However, there's things that we need to work on, areas of growth. So as often as we come to mind, please pray for us.

Pray for our faithfulness, our courage, keeping in step with the Spirit, our wisdom and figuring out what it means to be a church downtown Vancouver. So, Father, we pray.

Father, we thank you for Christian history. Thank you that when we come into your family, it's not just us and the New Testament now. It's like thousands of years of church history where we find lives of faithful men and women who followed you and sought to live for Christ in their moment in time.

[1:08] We desire to do the same thing. And we look to their example to gain some insight and wisdom in that. So help us to receive what you might offer us this morning, to receive it with discrimination and discernment, but also with gratitude.

In Christ's name, amen. A couple of preliminary. Here's, Gregory and Nyssa lived at a time when they did not have cameras, so they used icons.

That's an icon of St. Gregory. As you can tell by the dates there, he was a 4th century man. He was from a somewhat prominent family within the church.

His brother, Basil, was also a bishop, Basil the Great. His sister, a little bit less well-known, though she shouldn't be. Macrina was a saintly woman.

Gregory actually wrote a book on her and held her in great esteem and admiration. Good friends with another Gregory called Gregory of Nazianzus.

[2:05] These three, Basil, the two Gregories are known as the Cappadocian fathers. Very influential Christian theologians. Did the church a great service in learning to explain a little bit, just a little bit, the mystery of the Trinity.

Makes sense of that. Their imprint on the Nicene Creed, which we say in the Anglican church is important. So Gregory was the bishop of Nyssa.

That's not his family name. That's the diocese name, I guess. A few things to keep in mind as we go into this very interesting, somewhat controversial, enigmatic topic.

I want to talk to you briefly about understanding and being misunderstood. Think about a situation where you have felt misunderstood. Just think about that for a minute.

Maybe it's by a professor. Maybe it's by a minister. Maybe it's by a doctor. Maybe it's by a spouse. Who likes that experience of being misunderstood?

[3:07] Nobody. Yes. It's an experience that we hope won't be part of our life in heaven. No more of that.

It's easy to look at the question of relics on the surface and just sort of viscerally react. This is a bunch of superstitious rubbish. That's a very common Protestant response.

What I want to do today is try to dip into Gregory's thought to understand his thinking about relics, the rationale for it.

Not necessarily because we have to get to a place where we endorse it and embrace it, right? But because there is some gain, some importance, in trying to understand the theology of relics that was so predominant among Christians in the sub-apostolic era and really today in the historic churches like the Coptic Church and the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

So I want to try to understand on their terms. That's really the goal today. I'm not trying to lead you to a place where you'll walk out of this room and go tell David Shore that you need to put a relic in the sanctuary.

[4:16] That's not the goal. So the goal is to try to understand the thinking here. I'm going to stop a little bit into the presentation. We'll do a question pit stop. The pit stop that's going to be in the middle of the paper, that's just for clarification.

If I've said something or used a word, there are some archaic words I'm going to use this morning. I'll try to explain those because they're not words that we're going to see in the newspaper or on the McDonald's order screen or other places that we visit or at the sushi shop, given that we're in Vancouver.

So I'll try to explain those. But if you need some clarification, that'll be the point for that. If you have longer questions, kind of in response to the content itself, hold those to the end. I'll try to have a few minutes for that, though I am going to have to zip off because we've got service to St. Peter's.

But you can always email me. And if you want to get a cup of coffee, we can do that too. And the last thing, Nyssa and Nyssen. They both refer to St. Gregory.

I use them interchangeably as scholars do. So Gregory of Nyssa is often referred to as Gregory Nyssen or just Nyssen. So I'm not talking about two different people, cousins, something like that.

[5:28] You know, like some of those Old Testament king names that seem very similar, just a little bit different. Not dealing with you. This is the same person. So with that in mind, let's launch in.

I'm going to be reading this again. Try to read it at a pace that will allow you to take in as much as you can. Some of the material here is a little bit dense, so we'll have that pit stop question along the way. For many modern people, like you and me, the veneration of relics is regarded as an archaic and bizarre practice.

Odd feature of Christian history. At the same time, this practice, relic veneration, continues to be upheld and promoted in a lot of spheres of the contemporary church today around the world.

So, for example, provision is currently made, standard practice in the Catholic Church, for the intact preservation of the pope's body when a pope dies. That is done so as to ensure a ready supply of relics in the case that an erstwhile pontiff gets beatified.

This protocol hardly owes to the idiosyncratic sensibilities of ecclesiastical elites. Rather, engagement with relic veneration actually seems to be achieving a new zenith.

[6:51] In 2000, for example, Rome's relic-filled shrines attracted about 25 million holy year pilgrims. This is a popular level area of interest.

These observations take us to the discussion of today's paper, The Theology of Relic Veneration in Conversation with St. Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory's legacy, as you might know, is a wellspring for vital Christian ideas.

These include his Trinitarian metaphysical thoughts. He's sometimes referred to as the editor of the Nicene Creed. His ideas about the possibility, or at least the hope, of universal salvation.

People like Rob Bell, for example, could look back to St. Gregory of Nyssa and find a basis for that way of thinking in the early church. But more to the point for today, we discover in St. Gregory proactive public and personal involvement in propagating the beliefs and practices surrounding relic veneration.

And this area of thought takes us to the heart of what is known as the Cult of the Saints. You'll hear me use that word a few times. Cult of the Saints just refers to the practice of preserving relics and venerating them and putting them in churches or making pilgrimage to see them.

[8:10] All of that's part of what would be known in historic churches, like the Roman Catholic Church, is the Cult of the Saints. Now what I want to do today has four parts. First, I want to briefly trace the emergence of the Cult of the Saints in early Christianity.

When we do that, we can see that St. Gregory's ideas aren't actually that unique. He's rather in sync with what other early Christian theologians and lay people were kind of thinking and doing with regard to relics.

After that, I want to turn and look at opposition to the Cult of the Saints and to relic veneration. There's plenty of it. After looking at that opposition, I want to turn to the third part.

We're going to look at three homilies that Gregory of Nyssa gave during these events called panjiric vigils, which were evening events honoring Christian martyrs at the site where their relic was stored.

We read those sermons that were actually given to get a sense of what Gregory thought about relics. And then fourth and finally, kind of bringing everything full circle, I want to take those ideas and I want to read them in light of some other stuff that St. Gregory wrote.

[9:27] He wrote some important books on theological anthropology. Theological anthropology is a word that refers to how do we think about what we are as humans from a theological point of view.

You could describe what we are as humans from a biological point of view. You can also describe it from a theological point of view. So Gregory did a lot. He reflected on that a lot. And he wrote a book called, he wrote some books on matter and the body and the soul.

And I want to look at his ideas about relics from those sermons in light of his other ideas about matter and the body and the soul. Try to get a sense of what his rationale for relic veneration was.

And when we do that, we're going to see that it's not so easy to look at relic veneration in early Christian practice and just simply conclude that it's unavoidably superstitious and idolatrous and absurd.

That's a quick and hasty and un-nuanced judgment. To the contrary, we'll see that Gregory's thinking on this, which was important thinking that influenced other people, is actually thinking that is shaped by the Bible and certain ideas about reality and our reality as human beings that are very biblical.

[10:44] And so you might say that Gregory's theology of relics is a perspective that is genuinely imprinted by elements of reality according to the Bible.

I put that sentence very carefully, right? So that's kind of an important sentence and that could be a controversial sentence, right? So his thinking here is genuinely shaped by an understanding of reality that finds its basis in the Bible, right?

And so you can't say, therefore, that relic veneration is a sort of congenitally pagan activity, pagan superstitious activity. It's not quite that simple.

So, the living dead. Let's talk about the cult of the saints in the early church. Oh, sorry. I'm not always good at keeping up the slides so that, you know, I need a remote or...

Anyway, that's what I just went over. It's right there on that slide. But I've already gone over it, so... The veneration of relics enjoys a place of extended, even if checkered, importance in Christian history.

[11:52] As generally defined, a relic is the venerated remains of a venerable person. And relics can include bodies, bones of deceased saints, as well as objects which were once possessed by certain paragons of Christian virtue.

There's even a third class of relics, which are objects that were once in contact with somebody's body or bone. So, there's actually three classes of relics.

In the earliest days, Christian virtue that would make someone worthy of... their body worthy of becoming a relic was exemplified by martyrdom.

So, if you died for the faith, then some of your bones might become relics. Relic veneration is compelled by the desire to partake in the power and blessing a saint derives from very intimate relationship with God.

Biblically speaking, early Christians thought that relic veneration accorded with certain stories in the Bible. A story, for example, in 2 Kings 13, and then there's a reference in Acts 19.

[13:07] 2 Kings 13, those of you who are really astute in the Old Testament, is Elisha, the protege of Elijah, was buried and some bandits, I think some bandits, somebody died and one of them fell into the grave where this prophet was buried.

And when he fell into the grave and maybe it had gotten uncovered or it wasn't properly covered, who knows, he somehow had contact with the body of Elisha and he sprang back to life.

It's a story, you can go read it in 2 Kings 13. And then Acts 19, there's of course a reference to a handkerchief St. Paul had. St. Paul's not with that handkerchief, but somebody has contact with the handkerchief that Paul had and is healed.

It's an interesting story, right? Some of these stories we kind of skip over as Protestants. We don't really know what to do with them, but they're there. Commensurate with reverence towards martyrs, early Christians champion the benefits of being physically, physically close, physically close to saints.

And so in the early years of the church, sub-apostolic Christianity, kind of after the book of Acts as it were, they began to kind of go and get together for a worship service or to pray at the tombs of people that were considered saintly.

[14:28] This practice was kind of propagated through the use of what's called a passio, sort of a literary art where you write a story about the saint whose bones are here, kind of tell that story when you go there to remember their faithfulness, get a sense of how close they were to God, which was demonstrated by the fact that they lost their life because they wouldn't deny Christ.

This kind of passio is sort of the forebear of what we might know as hagiography, which is the medieval practice of writing these stories about the saints, like Butler's Lives of the Saints, for example.

Maybe a Protestant equivalent would be Fox's Books of the Martyrs, which Elizabeth I ordered placed in every cathedral, maybe, or church in England.

So they'd read these stories, remember these events, and kind of gather at these places where the bones and things were kept. With time, these sites where the relics were kept, reliquariums or marcariums, these are the words that were used, they began to kind of put some structures around them, little monuments and memorials.

I always, some of the pictures, actually I do have a photo, here we go. So, yeah, so these are kind of, these actually house the relics, and then sometimes they would also, these types of objects which actually house the relics.

[15:53] I don't know if any of you, I've been to Egypt and spent time in the Coptic church, so I've actually seen these. I've seen one that allegedly has the bones of Mark, the evangelist. Yeah, in it. And then, see this top right corner, right?

That, say maybe a box that has a relic would then be put inside this sort of columned structure, reliquarium. And in the olden days, those would not have been in a, in the first days, they wouldn't have been in a church, they would have been in a field or, you know, outside somewhere.

That changed for a reason, I'll tell you in a moment. So, these monuments, now as the Roman world began to sort of destabilize and marauders came in, they began to take these martyrium structures and the relics and they began to move them inside churches for security reasons, inside chapels.

They built shrines inside churches and chapels. And so then people, of course, gathered there to worship, right? Still gathering around a relic, just like they once did when, when these structures were independent, kind of outside, maybe somewhere in the countryside.

The widespread approval of relic veneration is a well-documented feature of sub-apostolic Christianity. St. Augustine famously articulates and defends the cult of the saints in Book 22 of City of God.

[17:16] Pope Gregory the Great confirms these views in his own work. He wrote many things he wrote, but one of them is called The Dialogues. And in The Dialogues, we find, quote, a fascination for and understanding of the power inherent in the cult of saints, close quote.

Consider Dialogue 1, where Gregory asserts this, quote, the amount of edification to be gained from a description of miracles is just as great as the study of Scripture.

So Nissa's beliefs about relics comport with what other people were thinking at this period. That's the point I want to make there. Voices of protest.

Not everybody shared that outlook. And disagreement and misgivings aren't just from the Protestant period, the Reformation period. They're earlier, too. There were naysayers earlier.

So sometimes relic veneration in the cult of saints has been subjected to aspersive criticism. In the 4th century, there were concerns about whether martyrs' feast days, which often drew people out to a reliquarium, overshadowed Easter itself.

[18:33] More people showed up for that event than for Easter. There's documented concerns about that. You can read more about that in Peter Brown's wonderful book on the cult of the saints.

Some critics argued that relic veneration was innately superstitious. One of the most ardent opponents was a guy called Vigilantius.

And he alleged that relic veneration, quote, had its origin in pagan beliefs and practices, close quote. His indictments against the cult of the saints provoked a venomous response from St. Jerome, who often said venomous things.

And he called Vigilantius for his opposition to the relics. He compared him to Julian the Apostate. I don't know if you know who that is, but it's not a good comparison.

In the 8th century, a few hundred years later, similar accusations appeared amidst the iconoclast controversy. Leo the Assyrian, he was an emperor, forbade not only the use of images in Christian worship, of the orthodox variety, such as the one I showed you at the very beginning, the image of Gregory of Nyssa, the icon image.

[19:51] So those were forbidden at that time. But he also, Leo the Assyrian, the political power who was a Christian, also forbade the veneration of martyrs as a form of polytheism.

So during his reign, all this stuff was ended temporarily. He had a council called, which is now considered an illegitimate council, but at the time when he was reigning, it was not.

This was called in 754. It's called the Council of Hieria. And it was convened and issued a series of decrees called the Hieria Decrees.

Surprise. And as a result of those decrees, lots and lots of relics and icons were hurled into the sea. All this was enforced by imperial might until the Second Council of Nicaea, which happened in 787, so 30 years later or so.

And the Second Council of Nicaea, the first thing they did was they said that the Council of Hieria was illegitimate, and so therefore all of its decrees are also nullified. And it refuted the notion that the memorabilia of the Lord's saints are no different from wooden images of satanic idols.

[21:11] So we do not accept that interpretation of relics. The Council of Nicaea, too, further said that any bishop, pay attention to this, any bishop who failed to consecrate a church without a relic should be deposed as someone who had, quote, flouted ecclesiastical traditions.

You can read those decrees if you look up the Second Council of Nicaea. So, controversy in the early period, and of course, continued opposition in the Protestant period. In the Reformation, there were new detractors against the cult of the saints, both inside the Catholic Church and also among the Reformers.

Erasmus. Bottom right, Erasmus. Above him is John Calvin. The placement on the page is significant.

So, I like both of them. Erasmus, for instance, said that there was lots of superstition around the cult of the saints at his time.

And he said this for Christians now have their gigantic St. George, just like pagans used to have their gigantic Hercules. He lamented the tendency of Christians to trust foremost in the saints for protection from dangers and misfortune.

[22:35] Erasmus did. Similar reservations, perhaps stated with more force, surfaced in the work of John Calvin. Right side top. He wrote a book against relics.

I actually enjoyed reading that a few years ago. Calvin humorously looks askance at the alleged authenticity authenticity of all the relics that were floating around the Middle Ages at that time.

I think he actually said if there were, you know, if all the pieces of the cross that people claimed to have, if they were all legitimate and you put them all back together, you'd have about a hundred crosses or something. So, somebody's telling a fib.

But more seriously, he likened the relic veneration to a form of idolatry. He said that honor that is due to Christ is instead being paid to relics.

Why? This is problematic. He resolved that even the best intention, the purest intentioned devotion to relics was destined, quote, to be polluted by some degree of superstition.

[23:36] So, Calvin was certainly a naysayer on this subject. In the face of these protests from people like Erasmus and Calvin, the Catholic Church maintained the position of the Second Nicae Council.

The Council of Trent affirmed that position, really protecting and even bolstering the cult of the saints. Even today, the debate over relics continues. In a recent article, Reformed theologian Peter Lightheart sustained Calvin's anxieties from 500 years ago.

He said, The veneration of relics encourages people to look for God in the wrong place. Other voices, however, even in Reformed circles, have taken a different view and suggest that the church should re-examine certain inherited attitudes towards the cult of the saints.

And if you want to read some of those, I'll be glad to send them along. So, let's look at Nyssa now. Here's someone who is very, very involved with all of this. We're going to look at a few of his sermons, which were given at these pangyric vigils, evening gatherings around the martyrium.

See, what he was preaching to the people who were there gives a sense of what they believed, right? How they self-described everything that was going on with all of this. Let me tell you a few biographical remarks.

[24:57] During Nyssa's period, kind of background here, during his lifetime, the martyr cult, relic veneration, acted as a standard bearer for Christianity and contributed to the spread of Christian religion.

Nyssa and his family exemplify this trend. His eminent sister, Macrina, wore a relic on her person, allegedly a piece of the cross, which Gregory inherited at her death and cherished.

Adhering to a common practice at that time, Macrina and Gregory's parents were all buried in close proximity to a martyr's shrine in that area. Gregory's mother had actually paid for that monument to be constructed earlier in her life.

Nyssa talked a lot about this and sought to enduce a sense of the importance of relics in his sermons. As a bishop, he devoted a lot of resources to the construction of new reliquaries.

So that was in the budget, and the budget always reflects your values, right? So, what we see happening in these years is the ecclesial regularization of relic veneration.

[26:21] So it's no longer just an ad hoc practice. It's actually getting normalized and regulated, regularized, and by the church through bishops like Gregory. Nyssa's own conversion was linked with holy relics.

This was very personal for him. In his pre-Christian days, he wasn't a covenant child. He attended a panjuric vigil because his mom asked him to go.

And when moms do that, you go. So he went with his mom, and at this vespertine event, he furtively ventured off to an adjacent garden for a little nap because he was bored.

While slumbering, he had a vision of the saints whose bones were, you know, in the shrine there. He had a vision. And they reprimanded him for his apathy in the faith.

This experience, quote, had a profound effect on Nyssa and influenced the rest of his life. As an older man, Nyssa reported having visions involving relics and indicated that some of his renown as a bishop actually derived from the ongoing intercession of his deceased saintly parents.

[27:41] So let's look at a few of these sermons. The first homily I want to look at is commemorating a Roman soldier called Theodore the Recruit.

Nyssa begins by classifying the bodily remains of Theodore as, quote, highly valued treasure. I've read the translations of these sermons.

They've recently been translated, so for the first time in English. Fascinating. Unlike a typical corpse, Theodore's body is not considered disgusting. His remains are considered holy.

Gregory stresses that. Correlative to this, Nyssa describes the tomb of Theodore the Recruit as a place of, quote, sanctification and blessing. This potency is evidenced through a comment about the dust that's there at the graveside in this martyrium.

It should be, quote, taken away as a gift and the earth preserved as a treasure. The dirt, right, where the bones were buried. In explaining the reason for Theodore's saintliness, Gregory gives a rendition of his contests.

[28:54] That's the phrase they use to refer to the deeds that evidence the great faith and virtue of a person who's considered the saint. So he talks about the acts of suffering and vigilance through which Theodore displayed his unwavering devotion to Christ.

And with a lot of dramatic flair, Gregory enumerates a whole series of trials in this sermon which show that Theodore refused to announce Christ when he was compelled to do so by certain detractors.

That's the basis for Theodore's veneration. And he uses Theodore's example to provide some moral and spiritual instruction for the congregation there. Now it's interesting, when Gregory is writing about Theodore in this sermon, he speaks of him not as absent but actually as zoetic.

He says Theodore is living and present right here, right now. That's how he speaks throughout the sermon. And to have contact with this guy's bones or the dirt around them is to encounter the martyr as if, quote, he's still alive and flourishing as if he is intact and appearing.

Close quote. In this depiction, Gregory illustrates a fundamental and prevalent feature of relic veneration. Relics, listen carefully to this, relics do not merely vivify the memory of a martyr but rather they signify the saint's palpable, palpable spiritual presence.

[30:25] It's not just remembering. It's more than that. So given that assumption, Gregory presents Theodore as an active protector and intercessor for Christians who were there at that event that night.

Theodore is interceding with God for you. He's protecting you. He's even credited for subduing an ominous invasion by barbarian siths during the previous year. They didn't sack us and overtake us because of Theodore's intercession and protection.

In like manner, Theodore continues to intercede for the people who were there to God. Nyssa actually encourages people to kind of pray to Theodore to intercede for them and he says that it's kind of like quote, asking God's bodyguard for a favor.

That's what he says. At the end of the sermon, sigh of relief for all of us Protestants, Nyssa is careful to delineate the distinction between the veneration of Theodore and the worship of God.

He actually devotes considerable time to that distinction at the end of the sermon. We might think he's not being very consistent but at least formally he makes that distinction. He says, we're all gathered here.

[31:45] The chief purpose is to worship our common master, not Theodore, but the master that we share with Theodore. Theodore is no demigod. Rather, he's compared to an invisible friend.

That's a quote. And that friendship brings us protection and blessing from the church triumphant to the church militant. Theodore makes intercession on behalf of our country of the fatherland and Nyssa closes the sermon by asking for more protection against the Siths.

He asks Theodore for more protection and more intercession. The second and third sermons are a two-part pair.

Find encouragement. They're one sermon, two parts because Nyssa started giving the sermon and everyone stopped paying attention. And they started talking to each other so he quit.

And he started again the next day. Let preachers take heart. So, it happened to Gregory of Nyssa. It happened to any of us.

[32:53] This pair of sermons honor a group of martyrs called the 40 of Sebasts, the 40 Martyrs of Sebast. Like Theodore, these were soldiers. They were persecuted for their faith and they actually died by being exposed to freezing elements.

They all died of exposure because they wouldn't renounce Christ. Nyssa really stresses the fact that their relics function as a collection of relics together.

In part two of the sermon, once everyone was ready to pay attention, he talks about their contests, how they demonstrated their faithfulness and virtue. They were ordered to renounce Christ but instead, quote, they renounced everything in order to gain him.

Close quote. Through their indomitable faithfulness, they obtained martyr status. Nyssa considers them just like Theodore to be alive and extant.

We're not just remembering. They're alive and extant. And he gives expression to the fact that they are sort of living and present in some way by telling a story of a limping soldier who went and slept in the martyrium where the bones of the 40 were kept.

[34:07] This process was known at this time in church history as incubation. You go and sleep near the relics. And this soldier who had a limp did that and the next day his impediment was remedied.

So, what on earth are we to do with all of these very interesting stories?

Again, Nyssa's thought here is not unique. He's in sync with his Cappadocian peers and with many in the early church.

Broader patristic sensibilities reflected in his thought here. He's not a virtuoso. I think it's helpful to try to make sense of this by looking at what he said in these sermons in light of his more kind of focused systematic writings elsewhere.

Two sources are particularly opposite for this discussion. One is a treatise called On the Making of Man and the other is a treatise called On the Soul and the Resurrection.

[35:10] That's a very famous work of his. When we interpret his sermon remarks in light of those we can get a little sense of the rationale, the deeper theological rationale for relic veneration because he doesn't go into that in a sermon.

Just like when your preacher talks to you about the Trinity he doesn't go deeply into Trinitarian metaphysics. You don't necessarily need or want to know all of that. But it's important that some people know that.

So let's look at Nyssa's systematic writings as it were. And when we do that I think we can see that there is something genuinely Christian at play in his thinking here. Something that takes its cue from the Bible.

Maybe not perfectly. Certainly not above reproach. Nyssa made a lot of important metaphysical contributions to Christian theology especially in the Trinitarian debates of his age.

And in like manner I think we can gain some insight here. So when we talk about relic veneration we don't just have to speak of it as sort of a fetistic practice. We just believe the bones. Why?

[36:16] We don't know. Nyssa actually attempts to answer that question to offer an explanation a rationale. So in his book on the making of man which you need to know a little bit about today though you'll probably never read that book his discourse begins by asserting that man humans and woman are an integration of body and soul.

in characterizing our nature from a theological point of view he really pushes against any effort to place one element before the other.

So the soul is not before the body and the body is not before the soul. One of them is not more fundamental to our humanness than the other. We are the integration of body and soul together.

So that means he's not dualistic. He's not dualistic. He's not separating matter and spirit. Humans are dirt and breath as Genesis would say.

Body and soul coexist in all of us. Now what's he in stressing this which is a biblical insight as you all know he's really pushing against certain pagan conceptions of a human person that were floating around the world of his time.

[37:49] So he's pushing against ideas of the soul's pre-existence the soul's before the body the soul's more fundamental to the body. He thinks that that way of thinking is quote a fabulous doctrine of the heathen.

So Nissa instead suggests that there's a unity of body and soul that is deep and permanent. Deep and permanent. Foundational and permanent. Quote the soul is disposed to cling to and long for the body that it has been wedded to.

And they exist and are attached in a secret close relationship and power of recognition in virtue of their co-mixture soul and body. In other words the form of the soul this is the language he uses he's trying to describe things that as you can see are very difficult to describe.

The form of the soul is indelibly imprinted like a seal upon the body the material body. And while death does precipitate some sort of separation between the bodily elements and the human soul the affinity that they share in their concurrent existence persists in some manner.

There's a permanent attractive quality between body and soul. So we can't separate those two things like certain plateness did at that time. So he says when he has an analogy actually to try to explain this because it's a bit difficult and obscure.

[39:27] When planted seeds are dead in some sense yet they are not quote deprived by death of the vital power which naturally resides in them.

Right? They always retain some of the life properties of the full living plant. That's the analogy he gives. This same type of thinking also appears in his other work on the soul and resurrection.

And here he explicitly links his way of thinking to a biblical construal of reality. I'm only thinking in these terms because I believe the Bible is directing me to do that.

And so he's trying to sort of recast an understanding of the human person in light of what he's reading in the Bible. And again he's pushing against Plato, some of Plato's thought here.

He's talking about the perpetual co-naturality between body and soul. These two things are always together. He says that there's a vital energy of the soul that is diffused into the elements of the body.

[40:40] So even when the body dies, the soul continues to inhabit those elements in some ways. The soul is present with the body's elements when they are mingled with each other and also when they are separate from each other at death.

Now Nissa, what's he doing here? In context, he's really thinking through something that you need to think through in order to make sense of relic generation and he's really the first person to think through it quite thoroughly and carefully.

A lot of other people shared his same beliefs but they hadn't really done thinking through it and that's what he's doing in these works. And along the way he's kind of drawing in certain ways from classical philosophy but he's doing so in a critical way.

He's drawing from classical philosophy but he's doing it critically and he's offering kind of a new understanding of what it means to be human. And only when you understand that does relic begin to make any sense.

Relic veneration. So for example he assumes that we have a soul. He assumes that he takes this idea that humans have a soul which some people would argue is not actually a biblical idea.

[41:51] But he accepts that. He accepts that aspect of classical philosophy and classical kind of metaphysical thought. However he does not envision the body as a temporary and contemptible receptacle for our soul which will one day burst forth and escape out of this wretched body.

So he's like St. Paul in that sense. And in this what he's doing is he's assigning matter, stuff we're made of, stuff of everything.

He's assigning it a positive function. It's not negative. A lot of people thought matter was kind of negative, something to be escaped from. He's saying no, no, no. We've got to rethink that because that's not what the Bible says.

Creation is good, is what the Bible says. So he's kind of using Greek philosophy but he's altering it in light of what he's reading in the Bible to advance a certain more genuinely Christian understanding of these questions.

things. And what he's saying is that by its co-inherence with the soul, matter, our body, benefits from the soul's immortal quality.

[43:02] Hence the resurrection of the body. This is very much in line with his Cappadocian peers in this way of thinking. And this is a, but he's making a very notable innovation to understanding what it means to be human in all of this thought.

some scholars call this the material turn. He's saying that materiality, matter is good. We're not going to reject that. We're going to affirm that, even if it needs to be redeemed.

Now, this view, this material turn, actually is a corrective not only to pagan philosophy but also to some early prior Christian thought like the thought of origin, for example.

It was another important Christian thinker, controversial, probably much more so than Nyssa. And he's kind of critiquing origin in this too. He's pushing against Platonism that he thought was controlling origin's explanation of the human person too much.

He's saying, no, there's too much Plato and not enough Bible in origin. I want to reverse that. Don't need to get rid of Plato. Sometimes Plato has these ideas and words that are useful to explain things, but we need more Bible in that.

[44:15] As a result of this, a syllogism emerges. Let me try to state this for you.

If the souls of the Christian deceased are not dead, the souls aren't dead because they have an immortal quality, and if the human soul is fused to the body in a permanent, eternal way, then the material remains of martyrs are to some degree with mystery a locus for the abiding life and vitality of the saint.

So to be with the bone is to be with that person in some sense, not just a memory. This is what he's thinking. So deceased Christians are not absent, but rather they've entered into a different, albeit temporary, mode of life until the resurrection of the body.

And in this kind of provisional middle stage, a saint's life force is particularly strong with her relics, those material remains to which her immortal soul is fused.

Nissa's anthropology, as I understand the human person of soul and body together permanent, one not being more important and more basic than the other, represents a noteworthy step in reconsidering the nature of reality as a Christian.

[45:59] I'm not saying it's a perfect step, it's the definitive step, but it is an important step that we can see. And it issues an understanding of what it means to be a person and what redemption involves as a result of the type of people that we are, material and spiritual, that is very, very different from the ideas about those questions that Platonism had on offer at this time.

Platonism was kind of a dominant philosophy. And only when you begin to recognize this can you see how the relic veneration practices are sort of intelligible from a Christian point of view.

And so what's the lesson here, right? For Gregory of Nyssa and for a lot of early Christians who were indebted to his thought, he explained their practices for them, right? In some sense that's part of the work of a theologian, I guess.

The veneration of relics can't be dismissed hastily as a superstitious pagan and idolatrous practice. Certainly the first two, superstitious and pagan.

To the contrary, it's an activity that results from his effort to really rethink the nature of reality as a Christian. And outside of his Christian construal, in the context in which he lived, his advocacy and involvement in relic veneration would fittingly be appraised as irrational, superstitious, and asinine.

[47:30] If Gregory wasn't reading the Bible and in his own imperfect way trying to integrate it into his whole thinking about reality of the church, if that wasn't happening, then relic veneration would never make sense.

Again, in saying that, it doesn't mean that we can't critique this practice or say that his way of integrating a biblical perspective into our view of reality is sufficient, but it is to say you can't simply dismiss this as pagan and superstitious because the truth is all the Platonists at the time of Nyssa, they thought he was pagan and superstitious.

By their standards, that's what Christianity looked like. Does this make sense? So, to move away un ■ pane through the way Christ.

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