

# ST. AUGUSTINE'S PARADIGM: *AB EXTERIORIBUS AD INTERIORA, AB INFERIORIBUS AD SUPERIORA* IN WESTERN AND EASTERN CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

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**Abstract.** I argue that St. Augustine of Hippo was the first in the history of Christian spirituality who expressed a key tendency of Christian mysticism, which implies a gradual intellectual ascent of the human soul to God, consisting of the three main stages: external, internal, and supernal. In this ascent a Christian mystic proceeds from the knowledge of external beings to self-knowledge (*from outward to inward*), and from his inner self to direct mystical contemplation of God (*from inward to higher*). Similar doctrines may be found in the writings of the Greek Fathers (Great Cappadocians, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, etc.). Although there are many similarities in the overall doctrine and in particular details between them, it does not imply the direct impact of Augustine's theological thought on the Greek Fathers but rather the influence of the Neoplatonic philosophy on both Western and Eastern Christianity, in particular, of Plotinus' theory of intellectual cognition.

## I.

*The threefold way of the mystical knowledge of God.* Both in scholarly and in popular Russian religious literature, it is widely believed that Western Christian (or Catholic) mysticism differs sharply from Eastern Christian (or Orthodox) mysticism. This opinion has been shared by bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, Alexey Losev, Vladimir Lossky, deacon Andrei Kuraev, and many other Orthodox thinkers. At the same time, they would defend this opinion referring mostly to the late medieval and the early modern European Catholic mysticism represented by such saints as St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Hildegard von

Bingen, St. Teresa of Avila, Ignatius Loyola, and others. And very few Russian scholars have paid attention to the mystical teachings of the Western Church Fathers, with the only exception being St. John Cassian; yet for the Orthodox world he has always been recognized as ‘its own’, because he spent a long time in the East, and his works were included in the Byzantine Greek and Russian Slavonic texts of *Philokalia*.

In this paper, I will try to demonstrate a general agreement between the Western and Eastern Christian mystical traditions on a theoretical level, referring to their origins, and considering some aspects of the doctrine of the mystical knowledge of God, as developed by such influential Patristic thinkers as St. Augustine of Hippo, on the one hand, and the Great Cappadocians, Dionysius the Areopagite, and St. Maximus the Confessor, on the other. To do this, I will begin with the doctrine of the gradual spiritual and intellectual ascent of the human soul to God as a basic common feature of both eastern and western Christian mysticism. This doctrine implies three successive steps or stages:

(1) *extra nos* (‘outside of us’), (2) *intra nos* (‘within us’), (3) *supra nos* (‘above us’).<sup>1</sup>

The doctrine describes the mystical ascent of the human soul from the knowledge of the traces or signs of God’s operations or energies, as manifested in the external material world (the first stage), to the knowledge of God’s image imprinted in the inner structure of the human soul (the second stage), and, finally, to the transcendence of the very nature of the human soul in ecstasy and mystical union with God (the third stage). I shall refer to this conception of the threefold way of mystical knowledge of God – *from outward to inward, from lower to higher* – as ‘Augustine’s mystical paradigm’, for, as will be demonstrated later, Augustine was the first in the history of Christian thought who identified and clearly described these three necessary stages of the mystical ascent, as could be seen in his well-known formula:

*Ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab inferioribus ad superiora*

(‘From things outward to inward, from lower to higher.’)

Or, from a more explicative formula:

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<sup>1</sup> Augustinus, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 145, 5; see also *De vera religione* 39, 72; *Contra epistolam Manichaei*, XXXVI 41; *In Ioannis Euangelium Tractatus*, CXI 3, etc.

*Transcende et corpus, et saepe animum: transcende et animum,  
et saepe Deum*

(‘Mount beyond the body, and understand the mind; mount also  
beyond the mind, and understand God.’)<sup>2</sup>

As is well known, Augustine in his teaching on the knowledge of God generally follows the Neo-Platonic (more precisely, Plotinian) logic of intellectual knowledge that implies both spiritual and intellectual ascent from the external and material world to the inner world of the soul, and then to the world of eternal immaterial ideas contained in the universal Intellect, and finally from it to the First Principle – the One, or the Good.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, some scholars directly connect *Augustine’s mystical paradigm* to the *Plotinian triple pattern of mystical progress, or the threefold Plotinian ascent*.<sup>4</sup> Without questioning the impact of the philosophy of Plotinus on the teaching of St. Augustine (as we shall see later, Augustine himself recognizes his debt to Plotinus on this matter), I will refer to this threefold mystical ascent to God as Augustine’s paradigm, since it was his merit to establish firmly this concept in Christian mysticism, at least in the Latin West. Now let us consider this paradigm in detail.

## II.

*Augustine’s mystical paradigm.* In his early treatise, *De vera religione* (390 B.C.), Augustine described the spiritual journey of the soul to God as follows:

By wisdom the great Artificer knit his works together with one glorious end in view. His goodness has no grudging envy against any beauty from the highest to the lowest, for none can have being except from him alone.

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<sup>2</sup> Augustinus, *In Ioannis Euangelium Tractatus*, XX 11. Cf. Ibid.: ‘Tu si in animo es, in medio es: si infra attendis, corpus est: si supra attendis, Deus est. Attolle te a corpore, transi etiam te ... Ut ergo attingerem Deum meum, de quo mihi dicebatur, Ubi est Deus tuus? non effudi animam meam super carnem meam, sed super me: transcendi me, ut illum tangerem. Ille enim est super me, qui fecit me: nemo eum attingit, nisi qui transierit se.’

<sup>3</sup> See Plotinus, *Enneades*, III 8.8; IV 8.1; V 1.1–3; V 3.1; V 3.5–6, etc.; see also J. E. Sullivan, *The Image of God: The Doctrine of St. Augustine and its Influence* (Dubuque, Iowa: The Priory Press, 1963), p. 84; Andrew Louth, 1981. *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 138–139.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 235–236.

So that no one is utterly cast away from the truth who has in him the slightest vestige of truth. What is it about bodily pleasure that holds us fast? You will find that it is agreeableness (*convenientia*). Disagreeable things beget grief and agreeable things beget pleasure. Seek therefore the highest agreeableness (*summam convenientiam*). Do not go abroad (*noli foras ire*). Return within yourself (*in te ipsum redi*). In the inward man (*in interiore homine*) dwells truth. If you find that you are by nature mutable, transcend yourself (*transcende et teipsum*). But remember in doing so that you must also transcend yourself even as a reasoning soul. Make for the place where the light of reason is kindled. What does every good reasoner attain but truth? And yet truth is not reached by reasoning, but is itself the goal of all who reason. There is an agreeableness than which there can be no greater. Agree, then, with it. Confess that you are not as it is. It has to do no seeking, but you reach it by seeking, not in space, but by a disposition of mind, so that the inward man may agree with the indwelling truth in a pleasure that is not low and carnal but supremely spiritual.<sup>5</sup>

In this passage, as well as in some of his other early writings (*De ordine, Soliloquia*), Augustine asserts that man in his desire to know the truth, i.e. the highest and immutable Truth that is God, first looks for its vestiges (*effigies veritatis*) in external perceptions and bodily sensations. Then man realizes that the highest agreeableness (*summa convenientia*), i.e. God Himself, is not outside but inside of him. So to know it, man should turn from outward things (*foras*) into himself (*in te ipsum redi*), into his soul, which Augustine, following the apostle Paul, calls ‘the inner man’ (*interior homo*), where Truth is directly revealed to our consciousness. In order to prove the transition from the knowledge of the external world to self-knowledge as a means of knowing God, Augustine later argued that God, who is to be found not according to the sense of the flesh (*secundum sensum carnis*) but according to the understanding of the mind (*secundum intellectum mentis*), is the One who dwells ‘more inward to me than my most inward part; and higher than my highest (*interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*)’.<sup>6</sup> But even when our mind

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<sup>5</sup> Augustinus, *De vera religione*, XXXIX, 72; English translation is quoted from Augustine, *Earlier Writings*, ed. by J. H. S. Bourleigh (London: SCM Press, 1953), p. 262; see also *Contra epistolam Manichaei*, XXXVI 41: ‘docet autem unus verus magister ipsa incorruptibilis veritas, solus magister interior: qui etiam exterior factus est, ut nos ab exterioribus ad interiora revocaret.’

<sup>6</sup> Augustinus, *Confessiones*, III 6.11.

reaches the most inward parts of itself, it realizes that its own nature is changeable and weak, but the Truth is eternal and immutable. Thus we need to transcend ourselves (*transcende et teipsum*) in order to see above the top of our mind (*mens, intellectus*) the very Light of reason (*ipsum lumen rationis*), that is the eternal Truth, which is God, who makes possible our true knowledge.

Augustine's mystical paradigm is expressed even more clearly in his famous *Confessions*, which became the main point of reference for understanding Augustine's mysticism for all Western Christian mystics to follow. In fact, in the Seventh and Ninth books of the *Confessions*, Augustine describes three stages of his search for God (or mystical ascent of his soul to God), inspired by reading of Plotinian texts:<sup>7</sup>

- (1) The first stage: analyzing the external world and searching for God's presence in it;<sup>8</sup>
- (2) The second stage: turning within oneself, to the depths of one's soul, searching for a relevant notion of God;<sup>9</sup>
- (3) The third stage: moving above one's soul to the immediate contemplation of God.<sup>10</sup>

Let us consider some key passages of the *Confessions* where this threefold ascent is clear:

And most certain I was, that Thy invisible works from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even Thy eternal power and Godhead. For examining whence it was that I admired the beauty of bodies celestial or terrestrial; and what aided me in judging soundly on things mutable, and pronouncing, 'This ought to be thus, this not'; examining, I say, whence it was that I so judged, seeing I did so judge, I had found the unchangeable true and eternal Truth above my changeable mind. And thus by degrees I passed from bodies to the soul, which through the bodily senses perceives; and thence to its inward faculty, to which the bodily senses represent things external, whitherto reach the faculties of beasts; and thence again to the

<sup>7</sup> See Augustinus, *Confessiones*, VII 9.13–10.16; VII 20.26.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, VII 11.17; VII 15.21; VII 17.23; VII 20.26; IX 10.24–25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, VII 10.16; VII 17.23; IX 10.24–25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, VII 10.16; VII 17.23; IX 10.24–25; see also *Sermo*, 52.6.16–17; *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 41.8–9; *De civitate Dei*, XI 28; *De Genesi ad litteram*, XII 6–7; *De Trinitate*, VIII 2.3; *In Ioannis Euangelium Tractatus*, XX 11–12; Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, p. 233.

reasoning faculty, to which what is received from the senses of the body is referred to be judged. Which finding itself also to be in me a thing variable, raised itself up to its own understanding, and drew away my thoughts from the power of habit, withdrawing itself from those troops of contradictory phantasms; that so it might find what that light was whereby it was bedewed, when, without all doubting, it cried out, 'That the unchangeable was to be preferred to the changeable'; whence also it knew That Unchangeable, which, unless it had in some way known, it had had no sure ground to prefer it to the changeable. And thus with the flash of one trembling glance it arrived at the One Who is. And then I saw Thy invisible things understood by the things which are made. But I could not fix my gaze thereon; and my infirmity being struck back, I was thrown again on my wonted habits, carrying along with me only a loving memory thereof, and a longing for what I had, as it were, perceived the odour of, but was not yet able to feed on.<sup>11</sup>

In this remarkable passage we indeed see all three stages of the mystical ascent of the soul to God, which begins by examining the sensible creation of God and the traces of His invisible power and Godhead in it; then it turns to the understanding of the faculties of the human soul, ascending up to its highest faculties, *reason* and *intellect*, and finally, despite acknowledging its weakness and changeability, the soul goes beyond itself to direct spiritual contact with God as the truly Existing One ('the One Who is'). The same spiritual experience is described more fully by Augustine in his famous story about the so-called 'vision in Ostia' which happened to him and his mother St. Monica in that small town at the end of 387, before Augustine's return to North Africa:<sup>12</sup>

And when our discourse was brought to that point, that the very highest delight of the earthly senses, in the very purest material light, was, in respect of the sweetness of that life, not only not worthy of comparison, but not even of mention; we raising up ourselves with a more glowing affection towards the 'Self-same', did by degrees pass through all things bodily, even the very heaven (*perambulavimus gradatim cuncta corporalia et ipsum caelum*) whence sun and moon and stars shine upon the earth; yea, we were soaring higher yet, by inward musing (*ascendebamus interius*), and discourse, and admiring of Thy works; and we came to

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<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *Confessiones*, VII 17.23; English translation is quoted from *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. by Edward B. Pusey (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> See Paul Henry, *La vision d'Ostie* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1938).

our own minds (*venimus in mentes nostras*), and went beyond them (*transcendimus eas*), that we might arrive at that region of never-failing plenty, where Thou feedest Israel for ever with the food of truth, and where life is the Wisdom by whom all these things are made, and what have been, and what shall be, and she is not made, but is, as she hath been, and so shall she be ever; yea rather, to 'have been', and 'hereafter to be', are not in her, but only 'to be', seeing she is eternal. For to 'have been', and to 'be hereafter', are not eternal. And while we were discoursing and panting after her, we slightly touched on her with the whole effort of our heart (*atingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis*); and we sighed, and there we leave bound the first fruits of the Spirit; and returned to vocal expressions of our mouth, where the word spoken has beginning and end. And what is like unto Thy Word, our Lord, who endureth in Himself without becoming old, and maketh all things new? We were saying then: If to any the tumult of the flesh were hushed, hushed the images of earth, and waters, and air, hushed also the pole of heaven, yea the very soul be hushed to herself, and by not thinking on self surmount self, hushed all dreams and imaginary revelations, every tongue and every sign, and whatsoever exists only in transition, since if any could hear, all these say, We made not ourselves, but He made us that abideth for ever – If then having uttered this, they too should be hushed, having roused only our ears to Him who made them, and He alone speak, not by them but by Himself, that we may hear His Word, not through any tongue of flesh, nor angel's voice, nor sound of thunder, nor in the dark riddle of a similitude, but might hear Whom in these things we love, might hear Him without these – as we two now strained ourselves, and in swift thought touched on that eternal Wisdom which abideth over all (*sicut nunc extendimus nos et rapida cogitatione atingimus aeternam sapientiam super omnia manentem*); – could this be continued on, and other visions of kind far unlike be withdrawn, and this one ravish, and absorb, and wrap up its beholder amid these inward joys, so that life might be for ever like that one moment of understanding which now we sighed after; were not this, Enter into thy Master's joy? And when shall that be? When we shall all rise again, though we shall not all be changed?<sup>13</sup>

In this passage Augustine's mystical paradigm is seen very clearly: *from outward to inward, from lower to higher*. The spiritual journey to God

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<sup>13</sup> Augustinus, *Confessiones*, IX 10.24–25; English translation is quoted from Edward B. Pusey (trans.), *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, pp. 204–205.

begins here with an analysis of the external world (earth, water, heaven, etc.); then it proceeds to introspection and consideration of the powers or faculties of the human soul, and finally, the soul transcends itself through a spiritual and intellectual contact with God in an ecstatic state, which Augustine identified with everlasting life in Heaven.

Augustine describes the same experience of mystical knowledge of God in a more concise formula, based on the words of the psalmist David (Psalm 42):

I sought my God in visible and corporeal things (*in rebus visibilibus et corporalibus*), and found Him not: I seek His substance in myself (*in meipso*), as if He is something, what I am, and found it not, [for] I feel that my God is something that is higher than the soul (*aliquid super animam*). Therefore, in order to touch Him (*ut eum tangerem*), I thought on these things, and poured out my soul above myself (Ps. 42:5). When would my soul attain to that object of its search, which is above my soul, if my soul were not to pour itself out above itself? For were it to rest in itself, it would not see anything else beyond itself; and in seeing itself, would not, for all that, see its God ... I seek my God in every corporeal nature, terrestrial or celestial, and find Him not: I seek His substance in my own soul, and I find it not, yet still I have thought on these things, and wishing to see *the invisible things of my God, being understood by the things made* (Rom. 1:20), I have poured forth my soul above myself, and there remains no longer any being for me to attain to, save my God. For there is the house of my God, it is above my soul; from thence He beholds me; from thence He created me; from thence He directs me and provides for me; from thence he appeals to me, and calls me, and directs me; leads me in the way, and to the end of my way.<sup>14</sup>

In his other writings,<sup>15</sup> especially in the *De Trinitate* (ca. 400-416), Augustine provides a peculiar Trinitarian interpretation of his mystical paradigm, linking it to the knowledge of God as the Trinity. It implies that at each of the three stages of our spiritual journey to God we will discover three different aspects, or manifestations, of the inner life of the Divine Trinity. At the first stage, we will discover its vestiges (*vestigia Trinitatis*)

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<sup>14</sup> Augustinus, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 41.8; English translation is my own on the basis of Philip Schaff (ed.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1886) Vol. 8. See also *In Ioannis Euangelium Tractatus*, XX 11–12.

<sup>15</sup> See *Sermo*, 52.6.16–17; *De civitate Dei*, XI 28; *In Ioannis Euangelium Tractatus*, XX 13, etc.



in the external world; at the second stage, we turn from outward to inward, to our soul and understand the Trinity through its image (*imago Trinitatis*), imprinted in our soul or, rather, in its intellectual faculties; finally, at the third stage, we transcend ourselves and contemplate the Trinity itself (*in ipsa veritate*).

To explain it in more detail, we should say that from the analysis of the properties and structure of external objects and the external world as a whole, where our mind discovers such ‘vestiges’ of the Trinity as unity, form, order (*unitas, species, ordo*),<sup>16</sup> or being, form, order (*esse, species, ordo*),<sup>17</sup> or measure, number, order (*mensura, numerus, ordo*),<sup>18</sup> or measure, number, weight (*mensura, numerus, pondus*),<sup>19</sup> etc., our mind proceeds to analyze trinitarian aspects of its own nature, namely, it analyzes threefold patterns of sensory perception (both external and internal), such as visible object, external vision, intention of the soul (*res visa, visio externa, animi intentio*),<sup>20</sup> or memory, inner vision, will (*memoria, visio interna, voluntas*).<sup>21</sup> From these, the mind proceeds to analyze the threefold structure of its self-knowledge or ‘trinitarian *cogito*’, such as to be, to think, to will (*esse, nosse, velle*),<sup>22</sup> or to be, to think, to love (*esse, nosse, diligere*),<sup>23</sup> or mind, knowledge, love (*mens, notitia, amor*),<sup>24</sup> or memory, intellect, will (*memoria, intelligentia, voluntas*).<sup>25</sup> Finally, on the basis of self-knowledge, the mind seeks to transform and transcend itself and to rise up to the direct contemplation of God the Trinity as the highest and immutable Being (*summe esse, incommutabiliter esse, essentia*, i.e. the Father), the highest and immutable Wisdom (*summe sapientem esse, incommutabiliter scire, scientia*, i.e. the Son) and the highest and immutable Good or Will (*summe bonum esse, incommutabiliter velle, voluntas*, i.e. the Holy Spirit).<sup>26</sup> As Augustine explains in the 13th book of his *De Trinitate*:

<sup>16</sup> Augustinus, *De vera religione*, 7.13; *De Trinitate*, VI 10.12.

<sup>17</sup> Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, XI 28.

<sup>18</sup> Augustinus, *De libero arbitrio*, II 20.54.

<sup>19</sup> Augustinus, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, I 16.26; *De Genesi ad litteram*, IV 3–4; *De civitate Dei*, V 11; *De Trinitate*, XI 11.18.

<sup>20</sup> Augustinus, *De Trinitate*, XI 2.2.

<sup>21</sup> Augustinus, *De Trinitate*, XI 3.6; 5.9.

<sup>22</sup> Augustinus, *Confessiones*, XIII 11.12.

<sup>23</sup> Augustinus, *De civitate Dei*, XI 26.

<sup>24</sup> Augustinus, *De Trinitate*, IX 3.3.

<sup>25</sup> Augustinus, *De Trinitate*, X 11.17; *Epistola* 169.6.

<sup>26</sup> Augustinus, *Confessiones*, XIII 11.12; XIII 16.19; *De civitate Dei*, XI 28; *De Trinitate*, XIV 12.15; XV 28.51.

We wished to ascend, as it were, by steps (*velut gradatim ascendentibus*), and to seek in the inner man, both in knowledge [of the external world] and in wisdom [of the intelligible world], a sort of trinity of its own special kind, such as we sought before in the outer man; in order that we may come, with a mind more practised in these lower things (*exercitatore in his inferioribus rebus mente*), to the contemplation of that Trinity which is God (*ad illam Trinitatem quae Deus est*), according to our little measure, if indeed, we can even do this, at least in a riddle and as through a glass.<sup>27</sup>

And he concludes his treatise with the following prayer:

O Lord my God, my one hope, hearken to me, lest through weariness I be unwilling to seek You, but that I may always ardently seek Your face. Do Thou give strength to seek, who has made me find You, and has given the hope of finding You more and more. My strength and my infirmity are in Your sight: preserve the one, and heal the other. My knowledge and my ignorance are in Your sight; where You have opened to me, receive me as I enter; where You have closed, open to me as I knock. May I remember You, understand You, love You! Increase these things in me, until You renew me wholly!<sup>28</sup>

To sum up, Augustine's mystical paradigm implies three stages of mystical ascent: *external, internal and supernal*, which corresponds to the spiritual journey of the soul to God *from outward to inward, and from lower to higher*. Each of the three stages has a trinitarian structure corresponding to the manifestation of the inner life of the Divine Trinity in its *vestiges*, in its *image*, and in *itself*. In the following centuries, this mystical paradigm made a great impact on Western Christian mysticism as a whole.<sup>29</sup> It was used and developed by such Western mystics as St. Gregory the Great<sup>30</sup> in the 6th century, St. Hugh<sup>31</sup> and Richard<sup>32</sup> of St.

<sup>27</sup> Augustinus, *De Trinitate*, XIII 20.26; cf. *ibid.*, XIV 3.5; XV 6.10.

<sup>28</sup> Augustinus, *De Trinitate*, XV 28.51.

<sup>29</sup> See Andrew Louth, 1981. *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, pp. 133; William Harmless, *Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 93–95; Karla Pollmann and Willemien Otten (eds), *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1437–1439.

<sup>30</sup> Gregorius Magnus, *Dialogi*, II 3; *Moralia*, XXVI 12.17–18; XXXI 51.102; *Homiliae in Hiezechielem*, I 3.13; I 4.4; II 2.12; II 5.10; *In Canticum*, I 28, PL 79, 490, etc.

<sup>31</sup> Hugo, *De tribus diebus*, 1, 17, 21, 25, 26; *De vanitate mundi*, PL 176, 715; *De amore Sponsi ad sponsam*, PL 176, 990.

<sup>32</sup> Richardus, *De gratia contemplationis*, 3.6; 3.21; 4.5; 4.23; *De Trinitate*, 82.

Victor in the 12th century, St. Bonaventure<sup>33</sup> in the 13th century and others. The best known example of this influence is perhaps the famous treatise, *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum*, by St. Bonaventure, where he describes how our mind gradually ascends from the contemplation of vestiges of God in the external world (*extra nos*)<sup>34</sup> to the contemplation of the image of God in itself (*intra nos*: memory, intellect and will),<sup>35</sup> and from this point, it transcends its own nature (*supra nos*) and, in an ecstatic state, ascends to the direct contemplation of God as Unity and Trinity (*in Deum transit per contemplationis excessum*).<sup>36</sup>

In this respect, Augustine's influence on Western Christian mysticism is clear and undisputable. However, let us consider whether there are any traces or analogues of Augustine's paradigm in the Greek Christian mystical tradition. To do this, we need to turn to its roots, namely, the Greek Patristics starting from the Great Cappadocians.

### III.

*Greek Patristics: the Great Cappadocians.* Although St. Gregory of Nyssa is considered the deepest mystical thinker of the three Cappadocian Fathers, we shall begin our exploration with his older brother, St. Basil the Great. In his writings, we can find elements of Augustine's mystical paradigm, such as the importance of self-knowledge as a means of knowing God, and a description of the spiritual journey of the soul to God that is very similar to the description we have already seen in Augustine's *Confessions*. Indeed, in his *Homily on the words 'Give heed to thyself'* (πρόσεχε σεαυτῷ), St. Basil pays great attention to the self-knowledge of the soul created in the image and likeness of God:

'Give heed to thyself', that is, attend neither to the goods you possess nor to the objects that are round about you, but to yourself alone (σεαυτῷ μόνῳ πρόσεχε). We ourselves are one thing; our possessions another; the objects that surround us, yet another. We are soul and intellect (ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ ὁ νοῦς) in that we have been made according to the image of the Creator. Our body is our own possession and the sensations which are expressed through it, but money, crafts, and other appurtenances of

<sup>33</sup> Bonaventura, *Itinerarium*, II–VII.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, II.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, III.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, V–VII.

life in this world are extraneous to us. What, then, does the Scripture mean by this precept? Attend not to the flesh nor seek after its good in any form – health, beauty, enjoyment of pleasures, or longevity – and do not admire wealth and fame and power. Do not consider the accessories to your temporal existence to be of great consequence and thus, in your zealous concern for these things, neglect the life which is of primary importance to you. ‘Give heed to thyself’, that is, to your soul ... In short, scrupulous attention to yourself (ἡ ἀκριβῆς σεαυτοῦ κατανόησις) will be of itself sufficient to guide you to the knowledge of God (χειραγωγίαν καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἔννοιαν τοῦ θεοῦ). If you give heed to yourself, you will not need to look for signs of the Creator in the structure of the universe (ἐκ τῆς τῶν ὄλων κατασκευῆς τὸν δημιουργὸν ἐξιχνεύειν); but in yourself, as in a miniature replica of cosmic order, you will contemplate the great wisdom of the Creator (ἐν σεαυτῷ, οἰοεὶ μικρῷ τινι διακόσμῳ, τὴν μεγάλην κατόψει τοῦ κτίσαντός σε σοφίαν). From the incorporeal soul within you, learn that God is incorporeal and without local determination. Your soul, likewise, does not have local habitation as a dominant principle of its existence, but, because of its association with the body, it abides in a place. Believe that God is invisible from a consideration of your own soul. Your soul cannot be apprehended with bodily eyes. It has neither colour, nor shape, nor any physical determination, but it is discernible by its operations alone. Do not, therefore, seek as regards God that cognition which is gained through the faculty of sight, but, supporting faith by the reason, keep your apprehension of Him a spiritual activity (νοητὴν ἔχε περι αὐτοῦ τὴν κατάληψιν).<sup>37</sup>

In this passage, we may see many elements of Augustine’s paradigm, such as discovering the traces of the Creator in the structure of the universe, in the external world and in our body, turning from outward to inward, to the soul and its intellectual faculties, analyzing basic properties of the soul made in the image of God. What is absent here is the Augustinian trinitarian dimension of the inner self, and the way to the third stage of the mystical ascent beyond the soul itself to a direct union with God. All these patterns we find in St. Basil’s homily *On Faith*. Indeed, in this homily Basil briefly describes all three stages of the mystical ascent that

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<sup>37</sup> Basilios Magnus, *Homilia*, 3.26–27, 35; English translation is quoted from: Saint Basil, ‘Ascetical Works’, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 9, trans. by M. M. Wagner (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), pp. 434–435, 443–444. cf. *Hexaemeron*, 9.6.

a man should pass through in order to attain true understanding of God, transcending his own body and the whole world, both visible (material) and invisible (angelic), and by the power of his mind spiritually ascending to God, to the contemplation of His one nature and three persons:

Now if you want to say or hear something about God, break free from your body (ἄφες τὸ σῶμα σεαυτοῦ), break free from your sense perceptions (ἄφες τὰς σωματικὰς αἰσθήσεις), leave behind the earth, leave behind the sea, rise above the air, fly past the hours of day, the cycles of the seasons, the rhythms of the earth, climb above the aether, pass beyond the stars, their marvels, their harmonious order, their immense size, the benefits they supply to all, their good arrangement, their splendour, their position, their motion, their constellations and oppositions. Once you have passed beyond all things in your thoughts (πάντα διαβάς τῷ λόγῳ), transcended the heaven, and risen above it (τὸν οὐρανὸν ὑπερκύβας, καὶ ὑπεράνω τούτου γενόμενος), behold the beauty there with your mind alone (μόνη διανοίᾳ περιβλεψαί τὰ ἐκεῖ κάλλη): the heavenly armies, the choirs of angels, the dignities or archangels, the glories of the dominions, the preeminence of the thrones, the powers, the principalities, the authorities. Once you have flown past all these things (διαδραμὼν τὰ σύμπαντα), transcended the entire created order in your thoughts (ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν τὴν κτίσιν ἀνανεύσας τοῖς λογισμοῖς), and raised your intellect far beyond these (ἐπέκεινα τούτων τὸν νοῦν ἀνυψώσας), contemplate the Divine nature (ἐννόησον τὴν θεῖαν φύσιν): permanent, immutable, inalterable, impassible, simple, incomposite, indivisible, unapproachable light, ineffable power, uncircumscribed greatness, supereminent glory, desirable goodness, extraordinary beauty that ravishes the soul pierced by it but that cannot be worthily expressed in speech. There dwell the Father, and the Son, and Holy Spirit, uncreated nature, sovereign dignity, natural goodness [...] When our mind can purge itself from the material passions (διάνοια ἢ δυνηθεῖσα τῶν τε ὑλικῶν καθαρεῦσαι παθῶν), it leaves behind all the intelligible creation (τὴν νοητὴν κτίσιν πᾶσαν καταλιπεῖν), and, like a fish coming up from the depths to the surface, finds itself in a clean place of creation (ἐν τῷ καθαρῷ τῆς κτίσεως); there it will contemplate the Holy Spirit (ἐκεῖ ὄψεται τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον), where the Son and the Father dwell – the Spirit, who by essence and nature also possesses all perfections: goodness, rightness, sanctity and life.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Basilus Magnus, *Homilia*, 15, PG 31, 465.12–37; 468.37–45. Translation is my own.

We can find a very similar description of the threefold mystical ascent to God in the writings of another of the Cappadocians, St. Gregory the Theologian. In fact, he compares the spiritual journey of the soul in seeking God with the ascent of Moses on Mount Sinai, where he distinguishes three distinct steps: firstly, transcending matter and material things, secondly, turning to himself, i.e. to the soul, and, thirdly, transition from the self to ‘the Like’, that is, to God as the archetype of the human mind. In his famous *Second Theological Oration*, St. Gregory says:

When I go up eagerly into the Mount (ἀνιόντι δέ μοι προθύμως ἐπὶ τὸ ὄρος) – or, to use a truer expression, when I both eagerly long, and at the same time am afraid (the one through my hope and the other through my weakness) to enter within the Cloud, and hold converse with God (θεῷ συγγένωμαι), for so God commands ... What is this that has happened to me, O friends, and initiates (μύσται), and fellow-lovers of the truth? I was running to lay hold on God, and thus I went up into the Mount, and drew aside the curtain of the Cloud, and entered away from matter and material things (εἴσω γενόμενος ἀπὸ τῆς ὕλης καὶ τῶν ὑλικῶν), and as far as I could I withdrew within myself (καὶ εἰς ἑμαυτὸν ὡς οἶόν τε συστραφεῖς). And then when I looked up, I scarce saw the ‘back parts of God’ (θεοῦ τὰ ὀπίσθια, Ex. 33:22-23); although I was sheltered by the rock (1 Corinth. 10:4), the Word that was made flesh for us. And when I looked a little closer, I saw, not the first and unmingled nature, known to itself – to the Trinity, I mean; not that nature which abides within the first veil, and is hidden by the Cherubim; but only that, which at last even reaches to us (τελευταία καὶ εἰς ἡμᾶς φθάνουσα). And that is, as far as I can learn, the majesty (ἡ μεγαλειότης), or as holy David calls it, the ‘glory’ (μεγαλοπρέπεια, Ps. 8:2) which is manifested among the creatures, which It has produced and governs. For these are the back parts of God, which He leaves behind Him, as tokens of Himself like the shadows and reflection of the sun in the water, which show the sun to our weak eyes, because we cannot look at the sun himself, for by his unmixed light he is too strong for our power of perception. In this way then shall you discourse of God; even were thou a Moses and a god to Pharaoh; even were thou caught up like Paul to the Third Heaven, and had heard unspeakable words; even were thou raised above them both, and exalted to Angelic or Archangelic place and dignity. For though a thing be all heavenly, or above heaven, and far higher in nature and nearer to God than we, yet it is farther distant from God, and from the

complete comprehension of Him, than it is lifted above our complex and lowly and earthward sinking composition.<sup>39</sup>

Although in this description we can clearly distinguish the first two stages of the mystical ascent – first, the contemplation of creation and God’s majesty or glory manifested in it and second, the withdrawal from the body and the material world and turning to the inner self, – the direct encounter with God ‘face to face’ is not implied. There could be several explanations. First of all, according to St. Gregory, the human mind has its natural limitations, which are impossible to transcend in this life while our mind is bounded by our body and filled with sensible images.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the mystical ascent, for St. Gregory, results not in the direct union with God and in the contemplation of His nature, but only in admiration of the greatness of God’s nature and complete silence in the presence of God. The knowledge of God’s nature is not attainable to man while he is bounded by his material body, speaks earthly language, and operates with material images and categories. Nevertheless, Gregory leaves open the question of the possibility of knowing God’s nature in the life to come, apparently implying a positive answer. Knowledge of God will be possible in a state of deification when –

... That within us which is godlike and divine, I mean our mind and reason (τὸν ἡμέτερον νοῦν τε καὶ λόγον), shall have mingled with its Like (τῷ οἰκείῳ προσμίξει), and the image shall have ascended to the Archetype (ἡ εἰκὼν ἀνέλθῃ πρὸς τὸ ἀρχέτυπον), of which it has now the desire. And this I think is the solution of that vexed problem as to ‘We shall know even as we are known’ (1 Corinth. 13:12). But in our present life all that comes to us is but a little effluence, and as it were a small effulgence from a great Light (βραχεῖά τις ἀπορροή [ ... ] καὶ οἶον μεγάλου φωτὸς μικρὸν ἀπαύγασμα).<sup>41</sup>

The third Cappadocian, St. Gregory of Nyssa, expressed a more optimistic view on human nature and its ability to know God. Indeed, according to St. Gregory, the very fact that man was created in the image and likeness

<sup>39</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio*, 28.2–3; English translation is quoted from ed. Philip Schaff, ‘A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church’, second series, vol. 7 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1886); cf. *Oratio*, 38.7.

<sup>40</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio*, 28.21.

<sup>41</sup> Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Oratio*, 28.17. English translation is from the edition mentioned above.



of God implies that he possesses the possibility of knowing God as his Archetype, for ‘like is known by like’ (ὁμοιον ὁμοίω):<sup>42</sup>

The eye enjoys the light by virtue of having light within itself to seize its kindred light, and the finger or any other limb cannot effect the act of vision because none of this natural light is organized in any of them. The same necessity requires that in our partaking of God there should be some kinship in the constitution of the partaker with that which is partaken of (τι συγγενές πρὸς τὸ μετεχόμενον). Therefore, as the Scripture says, man was made in the image of God; that like, I take it, might be able to see like (τῷ ὁμοίῳ βλέπει τὸ ὅμοιον); and to see God is, as was said above, the life of the soul.<sup>43</sup>

St. Gregory distinguishes three types of knowledge of God: first, the knowledge of the *energies* of God manifested in the external world, second, the knowledge of God’s image and likeness imprinted in the human soul, and third, the direct mystical knowledge of God.

The first type of knowledge of God is based on the ‘possibility of an analogy from an operation to the operator’ (ἔκ τινος ἐνεργείας τὸν ἐνεργοῦντα δύνασθαι τοιοῦτον ἀναλογίσασθαι).<sup>44</sup> Indeed, according to St. Gregory,

Since the one who transcends all nature is by nature such, it is by some other principle that the Invisible and Incomprehensible is both seen and comprehended. There are many kinds of such understanding. It is possible even through the wisdom which is apparent in the universe (διὰ τῆς ἐμφαινομένης τῷ παντὶ σοφίας) to perceive speculatively (στοχαστικῶς ἰδεῖν) the one who made all things by wisdom, just as with human artefacts there is a sense in which one sees with the mind’s eye the artificer of the structure under consideration, who has applied his skill to the work. What is seen however is not the nature of the one who used

<sup>42</sup> On this conception see Empedocles, *Fragm.* 109; Plato, *Respublica*, VI 508b; Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, B 4.1000b 5–6; Plotinus, *Enneades*, I 6.9; VI 9.11.

<sup>43</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, ed. by W. Jaeger, H. Langerbeck, *De infantibus praemature abreptis, Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), III: 2: 79.16–80.1; English translation is quoted from Philip Schaff (ed.), ‘A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church’, second series, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1886); cf. *Oratio Catechetica magna*, 5; *De virginitate*, XI.5.3–9; see also Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique: Essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1944), pp. 224–225.

<sup>44</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *De beatitudinibus*, VI, PG 44, 1269B.



the skill, but only the skilful technique which the craftsman applied to the structure. Similarly as we look also at the order in creation (τὸν ἐν τῇ κτίσει κόσμον), we frame a notion, not of the essence, but of the wisdom of the one who has in every respect made it wisely. And if we may reckon that the Cause of our existence did not come to the creation of man out of necessity but by benevolent choice, once more we say that we have seen God in this way too, arriving at an understanding of his goodness, not of his essence (καθεωρακέναι λέγομεν τὸν Θεὸν, τῆς ἀγαθότητος οὐ τῆς οὐσίας ἐν περινοίᾳ γενόμενοι). So too with all the other things which lead our thought upward to the superior and more sublime, we call such things the apprehension of God, because each sublime idea brings God into our view. Power, purity, immutability, being unmixed with its contrary, and all such things impress upon our minds the representation of a divine and sublime concept.<sup>45</sup>

Besides this, we may find the first and the second stage of Augustine's paradigm (*extra nos* and *intra nos*) in Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, where he describes the ascent of the soul to God as follows:

The human soul has two natures: the incorporeal, intellectual and pure on the one hand; the bodily, material and irrational on the other. When the soul is purged of the gross habits of earthly life, it looks up through virtue to what is connatural and divine (πρὸς τὸ συγγενές καὶ θεϊότερον); it does not cease to search out and seek the origin of existent things (τὴν τῶν ὄντων ἀρχήν), the source of its beauty from which springs the power whose wisdom is manifested in it. The soul moves all its thoughts and capacity for investigation (πᾶσαν ἐρευνητικὴν νοημάτων δύναμιν) to grasp out of curiosity the object of its search, and limits its comprehension of God to the sole divine operation (τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν ἐνέργειαν) which descends to our mortal existence and which we fill in our life. Similarly, water moved by wind does not remain at the edge of the lake but becomes a spring gushing forth which rushes on high to its connatural state. Once it has passed the highest manifestation of water and becomes mixed with air, the wind's movement comes to rest on high. Such is the case with the soul seeking the divinity. Because the soul reaches from below to a knowledge of the transcendent (πρὸς τὴν τῶν ὑπερκειμένων γνῶσιν) and to a comprehension of wonderful works of God's operation (τὰ τῆς ἐνεργείας αὐτοῦ θαύματα), it is unable to

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., VI, PG 44, 1268B–1269A; English translation is quoted from: Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Beatitudes* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 68–69.

proceed further in curiously scrutinizing these works; rather, it marvels and worships Him who alone is recognized by his works (τὸν ὅτι ἔστι μόνον δι' ὧν ἐνεργεῖ γινωσκόμενον).<sup>46</sup>

Thus, St. Gregory distinguishes between the knowledge of God's energies manifested in the world and the knowledge of God's nature through its reflection in the human soul created in the image and likeness of God. The latter kind of knowledge of God is also closely related to self-knowledge as a means of knowing God, fully implemented by St. Augustine. Indeed, according to St. Gregory,

The measure of what is accessible to you in the understanding of God is in you (τὸ σοι χωρητὸν τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ κατανοήσεως μέτρον ἐν σοί ἐστιν), for thus your Maker from the start invested your nature with such good. God has imprinted upon your constitution replicas of the good things of his own nature (τὰ μιμήματα τῶν τῆς ἰδίας φύσεως ἀγαθῶν), as though stamping wax with the shape of a design. Vice however, overlaying the God-like pattern, has made the good useless to you, hidden under curtains of shame. If you were to wash away once more by scrupulous living the filth that accumulated upon your heart, the God-like beauty (τὸ θεοειδὲς κάλλος) would again light up for you [...] Therefore the one who looks at himself sees in himself what he desires, and so the pure in heart becomes blessed, because by looking at his own purity he perceives the archetype in the image (ἐν τῇ εἰκόνι καθορᾷ τὸ ἀρχέτυπον) [...] yet if you go right back to the grace of the image which was built into you from the first, you possess in yourselves what you seek. Godhead is purity, absence of passion, and separation from every evil. If these are in you, God is certainly in you. When the mind in you is unmixed with any evil, free from passion, and far away from any stain, you are blessed for your sharp-sightedness, for by becoming pure you have perceived what is invisible to those not purified, and, with the material fog (τῆς ὑλικῆς ἀχλύος) removed from the eye of the soul, in the pure shining of the heart (ἐν καθαρᾷ τῇ τῆς καρδίας αἰθρίᾳ) you see clearly the blessed sight. And what might that be? – Purity, sanctification, simplicity, all such things

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<sup>46</sup> In Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum*, XI, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, ed. by W. Jaeger and H. Langerbeck (Leiden: Brill, 1960), VI: 333.13–335.1; English translation is quoted from Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Hellenic College Press, 1987); cf. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *Contra Eunomium*, I.1.295; II.1.583–584; *De vita Moysis*, II.19–26; *Oratio Catechetica magna*, Prol.; *De opificio hominis*, 2.

are the luminous outpoured rays of the Divine nature (τὰ φωτειδῆ τῆς θείας φύσεως ἀπαυγάσματα) by which God is seen.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, through self-knowledge we can identify basic patterns of God's image in ourselves, i.e. properties of God's nature that would be perceived more clearly than in contemplation of the creation. Moreover, St. Gregory, like St. Augustine, believes that through knowledge of God's image in the human soul, we can partially understand not only properties of God's nature but also the Three-hypostatic mode of God's existence: our mind (νοῦς) is related to our reason-word (λόγος) and spiration (πνεῦμα), in the same way as God the Father is related to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.<sup>48</sup> However, this self-knowledge of our soul as created in the image and likeness of God is obviously not the limit of our true knowledge of God; it is but a presupposition for our soul turning directly to God, to mystical union with Him.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, such union is achieved by ascent of the soul to God, ascent that is both spiritual and intellectual and consists of three steps or stages that are similar to Augustine's mystical paradigm:

- (1) purgation (κάθαρσις) or withdrawal (ἀναχώρησις) from passions of the soul and material images (= *extra nos*);
- (2) ascent (ἀνοδος, ἀνάβασις) of the soul through visible to invisible, intelligible and hidden (= *intra nos* and, partly *supra nos*);
- (3) direct spiritual union (ἀνάκαρσις) of the soul with God, communication (μετουσία) with Him and contemplation (θεωρία) of Him in ecstasy (*supra nos*).<sup>50</sup>

Following Philo of Alexandria, St. Gregory describes these three stages of the mystical ascent on the basis of the three manifestations of God to Moses on Mount Sinai:

God's manifestation (ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπιφάνεια) to the great Moses began with light (Ex. 19:18), after which he spoke through a cloud (Ex. 20:21). Having risen higher and having become more perfect, Moses saw God in darkness (Ex. 24:15–18). By this example we learn that our withdrawal (ἀναχώρησις) from false, deceptive ideas of God is a transition from darkness into light (ἡ ἀπὸ τοῦ σκότους εἰς φῶς ἐστὶ μετάστασις). Next,

<sup>47</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *De beatitudinibus*, VI, PG 44: 1269C–1272C; English translation is quoted from Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Beatitudes* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 70–71.

<sup>48</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *Oratio Catechetica magna*, 1–2; *De opificio hominis*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, p. 229.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–24.

a more careful understanding of hidden things leads the soul through phenomena to the Invisible nature (ἡ διὰ τῶν φαινομένων χειραγωγούσα τὴν ψυχὴν πρὸς τὴν ἀόρατον φύσιν) which is symbolized by a cloud overshadowing all the phenomenon and which little by little accustoms the soul to behold what is hidden (πρὸς τὸ κρύφιον). Finally the soul is led on high (πρὸς τὰ ἄνω). Forsaking what human nature can attain, the soul enters within the sanctuary of divine knowledge (ἐντὸς τῶν ἀδύτων τῆς θεογνωσίας) where she is hemmed in on all sides by the divine darkness. The soul forsakes everything without, that is, appearances and ideas; the only thing left for her contemplation is the unseen and unattainable in which God dwells (μόνον ὑπολείπεται τῇ θεωρίᾳ τῆς ψυχῆς τὸ ἀόρατόν τε καὶ ἀκατάληπτον, ἐν ᾧ ἔστιν ὁ θεός). Scripture says of the Lawgiver, ‘Moses entered into the darkness where God was’ (Ex. 20:21).<sup>51</sup>

According to St. Gregory, when our mind, being purified and enlightened, renounces all sensible images and rational concepts, withdrawing itself from all corporeal and mental activity, it enters into the ‘inner sanctuary’ (τὸ ἄδυτον, τὰ ἄδυτα, τὸ ἐνδότερον), which means a reality both internal and transcendental, where it comes to a direct encounter with God:

The religious knowledge comes at first to those who receive it as light. Therefore what is perceived to be the contrary to religion is darkness (σκοτός), and the escape from darkness comes about when one participates in light (τῇ μετουσίᾳ τοῦ φωτός). But as the mind (νοῦς) progresses and, through an ever greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality (τῆς τῶν ὄντων κατανοήσεως), as it approaches more nearly to contemplation (τῇ θεωρίᾳ), it sees more clearly what of the Divine nature is un contemplated (τὸ τῆς θείας φύσεως ἀθεώρητον). For leaving behind everything that is observed (πᾶν τὸ φαινόμενον), not only what sense comprehends, but also what the intelligence (διάνοια) thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper (πρὸς τὸ ἐνδότερον), until by the intelligence’s yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible (πρὸς τὸ ἀθέατόν τε καὶ ἀκατάληπτον), and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing (τὸ ἰδεῖν ἐν τῷ μὴ ἰδεῖν), because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides

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<sup>51</sup> In Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum*, XI, *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, VI: 322.9–323.9; English translation is quoted from Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*.

by incomprehensibility (τῆ ἀκαταληψία) as by a kind of darkness (οἶόν τι νι γνόφω).<sup>52</sup>

Thus in St. Gregory we find a gradual ascent of the soul to God by means of renouncing the external and visible realm and immersion into the internal and invisible realm where the direct encounter with God takes place.

Now let us turn to early Byzantine theology to look for other analogues of Augustine's mystical paradigm.

#### IV.

*Early Byzantine theology: Pseudo-Dionysius and St. Maximus the Confessor.* We may see the notion of the threefold mystical ascent of the soul to God, similar to Augustine's view, in the writings of two eminent theologians of the early Byzantine period, Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius) and St. Maximus the Confessor. The former, having been influenced by a Neo-Platonist, Proclus, believed that everything tends, by nature, to return to God as its First Cause and the ultimate end:

And, just as Goodness turns all things to Itself, and is chief collector of things scattered, as One-springing and One-making Deity, and all things aspire to it, as Source and Bond and End, and it is the Good, as the Oracles say, from Which all things subsisted, and are being brought into being by an all-perfect Cause; and in Which all things consisted, as guarded and governed in an all-controlling route; and to Which all things are turned, as to their own proper end; and to Which all aspire – the intellectual and rational indeed, through knowledge (τὰ μὲν νοερά καὶ λογικὰ γνωστικῶς), and the sensible through the senses (αἰσθητικῶς), and those bereft of sensible perception by the innate movement of the aspiration after life (τῆ ἐμφύτῳ κινήσει τῆς ζωτικῆς ἐφέσεως), and those without life, and merely being, by their aptitude for mere substantial participation (τῆ πρὸς μόνην τὴν οὐσιώδη μέθεξι ἐπιτηδειότητι).<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Gregorius Nyssenus, *De vita Moysis*, I.162.7–163.8; English translation is quoted from Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. by A. J. Malherbe and E. Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 94–95.

<sup>53</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus*, IV 4; English translation is quoted from Dionysius the Areopagite, *Works*, trans. by John Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1897), p. 31; cf. I 5.

In so far as man separated himself from the ‘true goodness’ (ἡ τῆς ὄντως ἀγαθότητος ὀλέθριος ἀποστασία),<sup>54</sup> moved away from the one God and turned to the external and material world, Pseudo-Dionysius views his salvation as a ‘return’ (ἐπιστροφή) to his original state of simplicity and unity with God, or, to use his own words, as a transition ‘from the multitude to the oneness’ (ἀπὸ τῶν πολλῶν ἐπὶ τὸ ἕν)<sup>55</sup>, ‘into the Divine monad’ (εἰς θεοειδῆ μονάδα).<sup>56</sup> The union of the soul with God (ἕνωσις) is achieved by means of ‘the powers of the Divine unity’ (τῆ δυνάμει τῆς θεϊκῆς ἐνότητος) and a withdrawal from the sensible and phenomenal world.<sup>57</sup> God’s power ‘makes [humans] one, after the example of its own unifying Oneness’ (ἐνοποιεῖ κατὰ τὴν ἀπλωτικὴν αὐτῆς ἕνωσιν).<sup>58</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius connects this process of turning from outward to inward, from multitude to oneness, to three intellectual movements of the human soul, which he describes as follows:

Further, there is a movement of soul, circular indeed (ψυχῆς κίνησις κυκλική), – the entrance into itself from things without (εἰς αὐτὴν εἴσοδος ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξω), and the unified convolution of its intellectual powers (τῶν νοερῶν αὐτῆς δυνάμεων ἡ ἐνοειδῆς συνέλιξις), bequeathing to it inerrancy, as it were, in a sort of circle (ὥσπερ ἐν τινὶ κύκλῳ), and turning and collecting itself, from the many things without (ἀπὸ τῶν πολλῶν τῶν ἔξωθεν αὐτὴν ἐπιστρέφουσα), first to itself, then, as having become single, uniting with the uniquely unified powers, and thus conducting to the Beautiful and Good, which is above all things being, and One and the Same, and without beginning and without end. But a soul is moved spirally (ἐλικοειδῶς κινεῖται), in so far as it is illuminated, as to the divine kinds of knowledge (τὰς θείας ἐλλάμπεται γνώσεις), in a manner proper to itself, not intuitively and at once, but logically and discursively (οὐ νοερῶς καὶ ἐνιαίως, ἀλλὰ λογικῶς καὶ διεξοδικῶς); and, as it were, by mingled and relative operations; but in a straight line (τὴν κατ’ εὐθειαν), when, not entering into itself, and being moved by unique intuition (ἐνικῆ νοερότητι) – for this, as I said, is the circular, – but advancing to things around itself (πρὸς τὰ περὶ αὐτὴν προϊοῦσα), and from things without, it is, as it were, conducted from certain symbols,

<sup>54</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, III 11.

<sup>55</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus*, XIII 3.

<sup>56</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus*, I 4; *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, VI 3; *De caelesti hierarchia*, I 1.

<sup>57</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus*, XIII 3; *De mystica theologia*, I 3.

<sup>58</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De caelesti hierarchia*, I 2.

varied and multiplied, to the simple and unified contemplations (ἀπὸ τῶν ἕξωθεν ὡσπερ ἀπὸ τινων συμβόλων πεποικιλμένων καὶ πεπληθυσμένων ἐπὶ τὰς ἀπλᾶς καὶ ἡνωμένας ἀνάγεται θεωρίας).<sup>59</sup>

It seems that here we find all the three stages of Augustine's mystical paradigm described in a reverse and somewhat confused order:

- (3) a circular movement of soul from outward to inward (*intra nos*) and then beyond itself to the One, the Good and the Beautiful (*supra nos*);
- (2) a spiral movement from premises to consequences by means of logical operations (both *extra nos* and *intra nos*);
- (1) a straight-line movement through the multiple external symbols to the simple and unified contemplation of the invisible things (*extra nos*).

To this teaching of the three intellectual movements of the human soul, Pseudo-Dionysius adds his doctrine of a threefold intellectual process of 'purification' (κάθαρσις), 'illumination' (φωτισμός), and 'perfection' (τελείωσις).<sup>60</sup> He gives a brief description of this threefold process of the mystical ascent in the *Celestial Hierarchy*:

It is necessary then, as I think, that those who are being purified should be completely purged, without stain, and be freed from all dissimilar confusion (πάσης ἡλευθερωῖσθαι τῆς ἀνομοίου συμφύρσεως); that those who are being illuminated should be filled with the Divine Light, conducted to the habit and faculty of contemplation in all purity of the eyes of mind (ἀποπληροῦσθαι τοῦ θείου φωτὸς πρὸς θεωρητικὴν ἕξιν καὶ δύναμιν ἐν πανάγνοις νοῶς ὀφθαλμοῖς); that those who are being initiated should be separated from the imperfect, and become recipients of that perfecting science of the sacred things contemplated (μετόχους ... τῆς τῶν ἐποπτευθέντων ἱερῶν τελειωτικῆς ἐπιστήμης).<sup>61</sup>

According to Pseudo-Dionysius, the last stage of the mystical ascent consists of a direct 'sense' of God, a mysterious 'touch' (συνάπτεισθαι) of Him and an 'immersion' (εἰσδύειν) in Him. When the human mind becomes free of all things, images, and thoughts, it goes into 'the

<sup>59</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus*, IV 9; English translation is quoted from Dionysius the Areopagite. *Works*, trans. by John Parker, p. 34.

<sup>60</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De caelesti hierarchia*, III 2–3; VII 3.

<sup>61</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De caelesti hierarchia*, III 3; English translation is quoted from Dionysius the Areopagite. *Works*, trans. by John Parker, p. 155.



darkness of mysterious silence' (τῆς κρυφιούστου σιγῆς γνόφον),<sup>62</sup> into a state of absence of any thoughts (ἀλογία παντελῆς καὶ ἀνοησία)<sup>63</sup> and of all intellectual activity (τῆ πάσης γνώσεως ἀνενεργησία); in this moment of 'pure ecstasy' (τῆ καθαρῶς ἐκστάσει), the mind can directly touch God and become united with Him by means of a 'union beyond intellectual conception' (τῆς ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἐνώσεως).<sup>64</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, like St. Gregory of Nyssa, describes this state of mind as an 'ecstasis' (ἐκστασις), 'peace' or 'rest' (ἀνάπαυσις, στασις), 'silence' (ἡσυχία), and '[sober] inebriation' (μέθη). In this moment, man returns to his original state of simplicity and unity with God and becomes united with Him as much as possible (καθ' ὅσον καὶ ἡμῖν ἐκείνῳ συνάπτεσθαι δυνατόν), thereby achieving 'deification' (θέωσις).<sup>65</sup>

Another splendid example of rethinking Augustine's mystical paradigm in the Christian East can be seen in St. Maximus the Confessor. Generally following the Platonic distinction between sensual and intellectual cognition, St. Maximus develops his original theory of the three movements or motions of the human soul, which are closely related to its cognitive faculties: *mind*, *reason*, and *sense* (νοῦς, λόγος, αἴσθησις):<sup>66</sup>

[The Fathers] illuminated by grace, [teach] that the soul has three kinds of motions that converge into one: that of the mind (κατὰ νοῦν), that of reason (κατὰ λόγον), and that of sense (κατὰ αἴσθησιν). The [first] is a simple and inexplicable motion, according to which the soul, moved in an unknowable way close to God (ἀγνώστως περὶ Θεὸν κινουμένη), knows Him in a transcendent way that has nothing to do with any of the things that exist. The [second] is motion in accordance with the defining cause of something unknown (κατ' αἰτίαν ὀριστικὴν τοῦ ἀγνώστου), according to which, moved naturally, the soul applies its powers of knowing to all the natural reasons of those things that are known only with reference to a cause, which are the forms (τοὺς ἐπ' αὐτῇ φυσικοὺς πάντας λόγους τοῦ κατ' αἰτίαν μόνον ἐγνωσμένου μορφωτικοὺς ὄντας). The [third] is composite motion (τὴν δέ σύνθετον), according to which, affected by things outside (τῶν ἐκτὸς ἐφαπτομένη) as by certain symbols

<sup>62</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia*, I 1.

<sup>63</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia*, III.

<sup>64</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus*, I 4; *De mystica theologia*, I 1; I 3; *Epistula* 5.

<sup>65</sup> Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus*, XIII 3.

<sup>66</sup> Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91, 1116.



(ὡς ἔκ τινων συμβόλων), the soul gains for itself some impression of the meaning of visible things. In a noble manner, by these [motions] [the Fathers] pass beyond this present age of trials in accordance with the true and immutable form of [each] natural motion, so that they make sense, which possesses the spiritual reasons of things perceived through the senses (τῶν αἰσθητῶν πνευματικούς λόγους), ascend by means of reason (διὰ μέσου τοῦ λόγου) up to mind, and, in a singular way, they unite reason to mind, which possesses the meanings of beings (πρὸς τὸν νοῦν τοὺς τῶν ὄντων ἔχοντα λόγους), in accordance with one, simple and undivided sagacity. Thus they raise the mind, freed and pure of any motion around any existing thing and at rest in its own natural activity (αὐτῆς τῆς καθ' αὐτὸν φυσικῆς ἐνεργείας ἡμεοῦντα), to God, so that in this way they are wholly gathered to God, and made wholly worthy through the Spirit of being united with the whole Godhead (ὀλικῶς πρὸς Θεὸν συναχθέντες, ὅλοι ὅλω Θεῷ ἐγκραθῆναι διὰ τοῦ Πνεύματος ἠξιώθησαν), for they bear the whole image of the heavenly, so far as is humanly possible, and draw down the Divine appearance (ἔλξαντες τῆς θείας ἐμφάσεως) to such a degree, if it is permitted to say this, that they are drawn to God and united with Him.<sup>67</sup>

It seems that these three cognitive movements of the soul are very similar not only to those described by Pseudo-Dionysius,<sup>68</sup> but also to the three stages of Augustine's mystical paradigm (though, as in case of Pseudo-Dionysius, listed in a reverse order). Indeed, according to St. Maximus, at first, the soul perceives external visible things (τῶν ἐκτός) through sensory perception, and recognizes in them, as in certain *symbols* (ὡς ἔκ τινων συμβόλων), the *logoi* (τοὺς λόγους), i.e. rational principles, reasons or meanings of things, which reflect the threefold divine activity in the world, or the signs of God as Creator, Provider and Judge of all things.<sup>69</sup> Then the soul turns to itself and reveals the *logoi* of itself and its own perfections, which reflect God as the Cause of the soul and its natural powers; still, His essence remains incomprehensible for the soul. Finally, the soul combines the first two movements into one, the

<sup>67</sup> Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91, 1112–1113; English translation is quoted from: Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, trans. by Nicholas Conostas, vol. 1 (Cambridge Mass, London: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>68</sup> See Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill Archive, 1978), p. 253, n. 229; Andrew Louth, *St. Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 204, n. 7.

<sup>69</sup> See Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91, 1132–1136.

third ‘simple and inexplicable movement’, according to which, in some unknowable way, the soul moves close to God (περι Θεόν), although it cannot perceive His essence because of His infiniteness and absolute superiority. Nevertheless, the soul, ceasing its own natural activity, may come so close to God that it, if we may say, ‘dissolves itself in God’ (Θεῷ ἐγκραθῆναι), i.e. becomes united with Him wholly and entirely.<sup>70</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As I have shown St. Augustine of Hippo was the first in the history of Patristic thought to frame rationally and to express verbally a key tendency of Christian mysticism, that is a gradual intellectual ascent of the soul to God, which consists of three main stages or steps: external, internal and supernal. In this ascent, a Christian mystic in his spiritual search for God proceeds from knowledge of external things to self-knowledge (*from outward to inward*), and from his inner self to direct mystical contemplation of God (*from inward to higher*). I have referred to this notion as Augustine’s mystical paradigm and I have demonstrated that very similar doctrines may be found in Greek Patristic writings and in the works of the Early Byzantine Church Fathers. Moreover, the doctrines of the Great Cappadocians on the knowledge of divine energies, on self-knowledge as a means of knowing God, and on the mystical union of soul with God were further developed by Dionysius the Areopagite and St. Maximus the Confessor. For Pseudo-Dionysius, the mystical ascent has a threefold nature, described in terms of the ‘threefold movement of soul’: the straight-line movement (to outward), the spiral movement (from outward to inward) and the circular movement (to inward and to upward), as well as in terms of the threefold process of ‘purification’, ‘illumination’ and ‘perfection’ that results in direct union with God. St. Maximus added his own interpretation of the threefold motion of the soul based on its three cognitive powers, sense, reason, and mind, having their own special movements, which enable it to perceive God in the external world through symbols and *logoi* of visible things, in the internal world through *logoi* of virtues, and, finally, mingling with Him in the supra-intellectual and mystical union. This latter stage of transcending the intellectual realm of thoughts and ideas refers to the deep apophatic character of the knowledge of God; at this point, the

<sup>70</sup> See also Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG 91, 1084; 1088; 1137; 1308, etc.

mystical paradigm of Greek Patristic and Early Byzantine theologians somewhat diverges from Augustine's paradigm. However, it does not undermine the evident similarities that could be traced in the overall doctrine and in the particular details.

Yet it does not give us any ground to insist on the direct impact of Augustine's theological thought on the Greek Church Fathers and Early Byzantine theologians. I think the only possible explanation of these striking similarities in their doctrines is in the influence of Neoplatonic philosophy on both Western and Eastern Christianity, in particular, of Plotinus' theory of intellectual cognition, based on the belief that in every human soul there is an inherent natural tendency to self-knowledge and intellectual movement from the sensible and material world to its invisible origins – the Intellect and the One – the tendency Plotinus expressed in his famous formula, concluding his *Enneads*:

This is the life of gods and of the godlike and blessed among men, liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of earth, the passing of solitary to solitary (φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον).<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Plotinus, *Enneades*, VI 9.11.