

Human Sexuality – Vector of Sin or Formative Power?

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Abstract: The study delves into historical and contemporary perspectives on human sexuality, particularly within Christian theological frameworks. It explores ancient philosophies' impact on Christian views, such as Platonism and Manichaeism, which influenced thinkers like Augustine. Augustine's notion of original sin, intertwined with sexuality, contrasts with St. Gregory of Nyssa's perspectives, suggesting sex as a consequence of the fall rather than inherently sinful. Fr. John Behr's reinterpretation adds an eschatological dimension, emphasizing the dual genesis of humanity, biological and Christological, through baptism. While Augustine's theology persists in associating sexuality with guilt, Behr's approach offers a more positive outlook, framing sexuality as integral to human growth and transcendence. The study highlights the evolving understanding of sexuality within theological discourse and its implications for contemporary beliefs and practices.

Keywords: *Human sexuality, Augustine, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Original sin, Christian theology, Platonism, Manichaeism, Fr. John Behr, Eschatological, Baptism*

Introduction

The origin theories of human sexuality inform our general attitude towards marriage, childbearing, and, more recently, gender ideology. One would run out of ink trying to pursue all the attention this subject has received over the centuries. In this present study we will summarize two ancient and one contemporary commentary on the subject. We will start first with a general overview of the ancient period and their attitude toward sexuality, then we will switch to some of the early Fathers: Saint Gregory of Nyssa and Blessed Augustine, and finally we'll examine a more recent interpretation of St. Gregory by Fr. John Behr.

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Philosophy and Sexuality

Christianity's understandings of sexuality were heavily informed by early philosophical thought, particularly Platonist and Manichaean ideas. Origen and Augustine were both influenced by Plato's theory of forms, which suggests that the world we perceive through our senses is an illusion. Plato believed that the soul is eternal and absolute, while the creation of man is the fall of the soul. The liberation of the soul from the body is an essential concept in Plato's philosophy. Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, believed that humans should free themselves from their bodies since they were originally connected to the *psyche* but had fallen into matter.² The views on the inferiority status of the body in relation to the soul, influencing their beliefs around sexuality, had a notable impact on Western theory, leading to a general distrust of sexual desire.³

For Manichaeans, an influential 3rd-century sect, cosmology determined practice. In their view, all matter, including the body and consequently sexual relations, is the principle of all evil.⁴ Augustine argues against Manichaean's belief that "God's substance, confined in bodies, is subjected to the violent motion of sexual acts and is released in ejaculation."⁵ Sexuality, because it leads to reproduction, has to be avoided as much as possible in order to avoid further imprisonment of the divine substance in a new body.⁶ "It is for his sake, they say, that they abstain from sexual intercourse, that he may not be bound more closely in the bondage of the flesh."⁷ Augustine will later take a stand against the contraceptive methods of Manichaeans, embracing the opposite view that procreation is the principal purpose of marriage and sexuality.

Besides Manichaeism and Platonism, Farley asserts that "stoicism probably had the greatest impact on later developments in Western thought about sex"⁸, producing the leading, recurring thought that sexuality, even in marriage, is good only when linked with procreation, as we will see clearly later in the Augustinian *corpus*.

², Bassam Antoine Nassif, *The Mystery of Marriage amid Deconstruction: A Dialogue between Orthodox Anthropology and Postmodern Perspectives* (El-Koura: Saint John of Damascus Institute of Theology, University of Balamand, 2022), 87.

³ Margaret A. Farley, "Sexual Ethics," in *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, ed. Stephen Garrard Post, 3rd ed (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 2420.

⁴ B. Nassif, *op. cit.*

⁵ Alan Soble, ed., *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006), 76.

⁶ Jason BeDuhn, *The Manichaean Body: In Discipline and Ritual* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 94-6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸ Margaret Farley, *op. cit.*, 2421-2.

An Eastern Perspective on Sexuality

In the East, as William Basil Zion observes in the preface to *Eros and Transformation*: “There is a lack of a definitive synthesis of a theology of sexuality within Orthodoxy”⁹. This allows for an inevitable variance in understanding the ethics of sexuality within the boundaries of the Church, including the possibility of the adoption of interpretations following Western theology.

In his study *Sexual Healing*, David Dunn analyzes, in parallel with Augustine’s view on sin and sexuality, the theology of St. Gregory of Nyssa on the same subject. According to St. Gregory, the pre-lapsarian state of humankind did not include sex which was a consequence of sin. Different from Augustine, St. Gregory thinks that God’s original intention for the multiplication of humanity would have been asexual ‘that mode by which the angels were increased and multiplied...’¹⁰ Although he falls short in telling us precisely what that mode was, in his belief, it did not involve sexuality as we know it now. So, while he never says that the original sin is sex, he argues that sex is a consequence of the fall.¹¹ For St. Gregory, salvation requires a return to the initial state, a redirection of our *eros* toward God and a return to an original ‘angelic’ condition.¹²

Jean Daniélou, in one of the first modern readings of St. Gregory’s *On the Making of Man*, goes to ask the following question:

What precisely is to be understood by this absence of sexuality? It is not any distinction between man and woman, since Gregory admits that God gave a companion to Adam in Paradise (XLVI, 373 C). Nor is it the absence of fertility. But it is the ‘animalistic’ way of propagating life: "God foresaw that human freedom would not turn towards the good... For this reason, it had to lose the angelic mode of propagation. In order that it would not become extinct, God gave it a mode of propagation similar to that of animal nature" (XLIV, 189 C). Thus, sexual life is not in itself evil. It is only a degradation. But it is the source of the passions which themselves lead to sin: "I consider that it is from this principle (the

⁹ William Basil Zion, *Eros and Transformation: Sexuality and Marriage: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), ix.

¹⁰ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVII.4.

¹¹ David J. Dunn, *Sexual healing*, in Theodore Dedon and Sergey Trostyanskiy, eds., *Love, Marriage, and Family in Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016), 60.

¹² „For we shall be giving a fit answer to one who raises the question how man would have been without marriage, if we say, as the angels are without marriage; for the fact that man was in a like condition with them before the transgression is shown by the restoration to that state.”, St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, XVII.3.

sexual life) that the passions, as from a source, have poured out upon human nature" (XLIV, 192 A).¹³

However, even though St. Gregory retains perhaps a more ascetic view on marriage, by his vision of an 'asexual paradise', he does not see sex as sinful nor considers it as the vehicle of the original sin as Augustine will hold, or as an "act of lust that confirms the self in its own delusions of grandeur."¹⁴ For him, sex could affect the soul in the same way as other normal physical affects, like food, drink, and entertainment could, if fallen out of balance. These activities are not inherently sinful, but excessive engagement with them can have spiritual consequences.¹⁵

Hans Urs Von Balthasar summarizes the thought of St. Gregory on sexuality by glancing over the idea of trespassing while concentrating on the positive aspects of human sexuality:

"Sex and the "passions", Gregory tells us, are a punishment inflicted by God for the sin arising from our freedom. On the other hand, it is undeniable that, in the perspective of "real" becoming, these passions, sexuality itself, are an undeniable favor bestowed on the spirit. But the one does not exclude the other."¹⁶

Of course, St. Gregory does not exhaust the Orthodox view on sexuality; some subscribe and complete his image, while others disagree or give it a different character. What is particularly encouraging in St. Gregory's opinion is the positive aspect given to something that he considers inherently on a lower level than our true becoming in God. Sexuality used sensibly, can help, as any other aspect of the biological facets of man's life, the transcendence into the full potential of humanity. "*If, through sex, man finds himself weighed down earthward, inclined toward his animality, through marriage he finds an alleviation of his hard and mortal life on this*

¹³ Que faut-il entendre exactement par cette absence de sexualité? Ce n'est pas toute distinction de l'homme et de la femme, puisque Grégoire admet que Dieu a donné une compagne à Adam au Paradis (XLVI, 373 C). Ce n'est pas non plus l'absence de fécondité. Mais c'est le mode « animal » de propagation de la vie: « Dieu a prévu que la liberté humaine ne devait pas se tourner vers le bien... Elle devait à cause de cela perdre le mode angélique de propagation. Pour qu'elle ne s'éteignît pas, Dieu lui donna un mode de propagation semblable à celui de la nature animale » (XLIV, 189 C). Ainsi la vie sexuelle n'est pas en soi mauvaise. Elle est seulement une déchéance. Mais elle est la source des passions qui elles-mêmes conduisent au péché: «j'estime que c'est de ce principe (la vie sexuelle) que les passions, comme d'une source, se sont répandues sur la nature humaine» (XLIV, 192 A) Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mistique - Doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Aubier: Editions Montaigne, 1944).

¹⁴ David J. Dunn, *op. cit.*, 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa* (San Francisco, Calif: Ignatius Press, 1995), 77-78.

*sad and wretched earth (ἐν ᾧ ὁ γάμος παραμυθία τοῦ ἀποθνήσκειν ἐπενοήθη).*¹⁷

Augustine's Theory of the Original Sin

An important fork in the road to Christian understanding of sexuality is the Augustinian idea of original sin and its link to sexuality.

The evolutionary path of the theory of the original sin is linked by many to the heresy of Pelagius (354-420) opposed by Augustine.¹⁸ According to Bishop Pruteanu P., a decisive factor in the development of the doctrine was Ambrosiaster's, erroneous translation and explanation of the text from Romans 5:12 (*Vulgatae* translation), "Wherefore as by one man sin entered into this world and by sin death: and so death passed upon all men, in whom all have sinned."¹⁹ The Greek construct ἐφ' ᾧ, not as a reference to death, as the Greek Fathers, but as a new reference to Adam "in whom" we all die. John Meyendorff, proposes another translation, in a more Orthodox note: "As sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, so death spread to all men; and because of it (= death), all men have sinned."²⁰ Theodoret of Cyre expresses even better the Orthodox viewpoint: „Having become mortal, [Adam and Eve] conceived mortal children, and mortal beings are necessarily subject to passions and fears, to pleasures and sorrows, to anger and hatred."²¹ The majority of the Greek Fathers agree with him, as most of them link Romans 5:12 with 1 Cor. 15:22: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive"; so there is a

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 78, from *De virg*, III, 376 A.

¹⁸ Bishop Petru Pruteanu, "The Doctrine of Original Sin and Its Influence On The Theology And Practice Of Baptism", article under publication. See also John H. Beck, "The Pelagian Controversy: An Economic Analysis", in *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 66 (4/2007): 681-696; Ali Bonner, *The Myth of Pelagianism*, Oxford University Press: 2018; Thomas P. Scheck, "Pelagius's Interpretation of Romans", in Cartwright, Steven (ed.), *A Companion to St. Paul in the Middle Ages* (Brill: 2012), 79-111; Peter Brown, "The Patrons of Pelagius: the Roman Aristocracy Between East and West", in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 21 (1/1970): 56-72. G. Maschio, „L'argumentazione patristica di S. Agostino nella prima fase della controversia pelagiana (412-418)", in *Augustinianum* 26 (1986), 459-479. A Fürst, „Zur Vielfalt altkirchlicher Soteriologie Augustins Berufung auf Hieronymus im pelagianischen Streit", in J. B. Bauer (ed.), *Graz*, 1995, 119-185.

¹⁹ In Latin: "Propterea sicut per unum hominem in hunc mundum peccatum intravit et per peccatum mors et ita in omnes homines mors pertransiit in quo omnes peccaverunt", or in Greek: Διὰ τοῦτο ὡσπερ δι' ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσηλθεν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος, καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διήλθεν, ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον (Rom 5:12).

²⁰ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987).

²¹ Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, 144.

solidarity “in death” between Adam and his descendants just as there is a solidarity “in life” between Christ and those baptized.²²

Nevertheless, Augustine is off to a different reading of the text, and he concludes that Adam recapitulates in himself the entire humanity and, as such, his sin is thus the sin of every man born from him. As a consequence, man receives by birth, not only the mortal nature of Adam, but also the guilt for his sin. Adam's fault (“original sin”) is hereditarily transmitted through concupiscence and can be washed only through baptism. Consequently, all infants are the heirs of Adam's sin and, if they die before being baptized, even as children without personal sin, they are condemned to hell.

The Augustinian idea of original sin was pervasive in the West by the 10th century and could have entered Constantinople via the 4th Crusade and the Latin occupation of Constantinople. Nevertheless, the idea of sin being transmitted through concupiscence, renders the sexual act, even in a lawful marriage, as sinful. Saint Augustine indeed qualified this to mean that original sin was linked to sexual pleasure, not sex itself, but, as Jeffrey Richards points out, Augustine's semantics got lost on the majority of clergy and laypeople who henceforth made ‘the simple equation that Original Sin equals sex’. As such, the mother in giving birth, because she had guilty sex, is in a state of sin from which she needs cleansing, just as her innocent baby, inheritor of the sin and the guilt of Adam, needs cleansing.

Guilty Pleasure?

Augustine's idea of guilty pleasure needs a separate examination because we see it slipping also into Orthodox thought. In a letter to his disciple Augustine of Canterbury, St. Gregory the Great (+604), although he affirms that there is no motive to prevent a post-partum woman from entering the Church, as others sustained, he determines that because: “The fault lies in the bodily pleasure, not in the pain; the pleasure is in the bodily union, the pain is in the birth”.²³ Another 15th century

²² P. Pruteanu, *op. cit.*

²³ “As to the interval that must elapse after childbirth before a woman may enter church, you are familiar with the Old Testament rule: that is, for a male child thirty-three days and for a female, sixty-six. But this is to be understood as an allegory, for were a woman to enter church and return thanks in the very hour of her delivery, she would do nothing wrong. The fault lies in the bodily pleasure, not in the pain; the pleasure is in the bodily union, the pain is in the birth, so that Eve, the mother of us all, was told: *‘In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children’*. If, then, we forbid a woman who is delivered of a child to enter church, we make this penalty into a sin. There is no obstacle to the Baptism either of a woman who has been delivered, or of a newborn babe, even if it is administered to her in the very hour of her delivery, or to the child at the hour of its birth, provided that there be danger of death. For as the grace of this sacred mystery is to be offered with great deliberation to the living and conscious, so is it to be administered without delay to the dying; for if we wait to offer them this mystery of redemption, it may be too late to

commentary on the churching service by St. Simenon of Thesalonika, affirms that the churching service: “cleanses the mother of the *childbirth tainted by carnal sweetness*.”²⁴ It is still uncertain how these influences have come to exist in Orthodox commentary, yet, the fact that they exist confirms the Augustinian impact. Although the idea of sinful pleasure is not typical for Eastern Christianity, the existence of St. Gregory the Great’s and St. Simeon’s commentary shows the Augustinian ideas of guilty sexuality were making way into Orthodox thought.

For Augustine sexuality was already present in paradise, but with a different emphasis. Here is a relevant passage from Augustine’s works, describing the prelapsarian state of sexuality and its progress as a consequence of the Fall:

“[T]he sexual organs would have been moved by the same command of the will as the other members are. Then, not needing to be aroused by the excitement of passion, the man would have poured his seed into his wife’s womb in tranquility of mind and without any corruption of her body’s integrity. For, though this cannot be proved by experience, there is no reason for us not to believe that, when those parts of the body were not driven by turbulent heat but brought into use by the power of the will when the need arose, the male seed could have been introduced into the womb with no loss of the wife’s integrity, just as the flow of menstrual blood can now come forth from the womb of a virgin without any such loss of integrity; for the seed could enter in the same way as the menstrual flow now leaves. Just as the woman’s womb might have been opened for birth simply by the influence of the maturity of the fetus, and without any moans of pain, so the two sexes might have been conjoined for the purpose

find anyone to be redeemed.”, “Pope Gregory’s letter to S. Augustine”, in Wallace-Hadrill, John M., and Bede. *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary*. Repr. Oxford Medieval Texts. (Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 2002), 77-78.

²⁴ “And again on the fortieth day [the child] is brought by his mother to the church, and being brought as a gift to God, the priest, standing before the doors of the church (for it is not fitting to enter before the [purification] prayer), seals [with the sign of the cross] the mother together with the child and sanctifies them both. And to the mother he bestows purity from the birth tainted with carnal sweetness, being fulfilled forty days after birth, in which the child also was made perfect and began to leap, and giving her permission to enter the church, not being worthy until then to enter, nor to be joined to the pure One, he himself takes the child in his hands, picturing Simeon, who took the infant Lord in his arms.” See Sf. Simeon Arhiepiscopul Tesalonicului, “*Tratat asupra tuturor dogmelor credinței noastre ortodoxe, după principii puse de Domnul nostru Iisus Hristos și urmașii Săi*,” vol. I, translation Chesarie Monahul, col. *Din frumusețile viețuirii creștine*, 2, (Suceava: Ed. Arhiepiscopiei Sucevei și Rădăuților, 2002), 108.

of impregnation and conception by a natural use of will, and not by lustful appetite.”²⁵

For Dunn “Augustine charted a middle way between the naïve Pelagianism of Julian of Eclanum, who saw conjugal sex as something innocent and harmless, and rigorist ascetics who would have every Christian don the black.”²⁶ He doesn’t assert that before the Fall sex would have been a “chore” without any pleasure but that after the fall, for the man and the woman, as Eric Fuchs observes, “their bodies [are] being dragged along as if in opposition to themselves by the "libido". It is thus concupiscence which is the consequence of the original sin, it is it which marks for ever the ambiguity of sexuality, which makes of it a threat where the man can unceasingly be as torn off from himself, stripped of his reason, of his autonomy. Concupiscence manifests the state of enslavement to sin in which man finds himself.”²⁷

David Dunn notices that for Augustine “orgasm makes every lover a selfish lover. Sexual pleasure overwhelms all our cognitive faculties. No matter how much we may delight in the companionship of our beloved when sexual climax comes, we are all just nerve endings.”²⁸ But the root of evil is not the orgasm itself, but our incapacity to resist its urge. The root of all of this is pride, the reason for our fall. The fallen man believes that there is inherent goodness in himself, independent of God, which is further justified by the “lie of pleasure”. Pride gave birth to lust which in turn tainted the sexual union. This is why “Augustine thought that sex, even within the bounds of marriage, was sinful. It is sinful because, no matter how much we might love our spouse, during sex, we love ourselves more.”²⁹

In the end, Augustine finds a way to redeem sexuality in the lawful union of a married couple, but only when “[the] husband and wife cleave to one another, they have in mind that they be father and mother” or when it helps preserve marital fidelity,³⁰ any other way is sinful.

²⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.26, cited in Dedon, Theodore, and Sergey Trostyanskiy, eds., *Love, Marriage, and Family in Eastern Orthodox Perspective*, in *Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies* 44 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016), 64.

²⁶ David. J Dunn, “Sexual healing”, in Theodore Dedon and Sergey Trostyanskiy, eds. *Love, Marriage, and Family in Eastern Orthodox Perspective*. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016), 63.

²⁷ Fuchs, Éric. *Le désir et la tendresse: pour une éthique chrétienne de la sexualité*. Nouv. éd. (Paris Genève: A. Michel Labor et fides, 1999), 134-135.

²⁸ David Dunn, *op. cit.*, 64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁰ Augustine, *On Marriage*, 3, in Dunn, David. J, *op. cit.*, 67.

A Contemporary Reading of St. Gregory of Nyssa – Fr. John Behr

In a more recent reading of St. Gregory, Fr. John Behr comes with a different understanding of St. Gregory's *On the Making of Man*, or, as he calls it in his new critical translation: *On the Human Image of God*.³¹

In the Introduction of this new translation, Behr formulates that in the Genesis account of 1:27³², God makes man in his image and, in the same time, as male and female, in one single act of creation. The succession implied by 127a and 127c is not temporal but is a reiteration of God's same sole creation act, but from a different perspective: as the image of God first and then as male and female.³³ An important observation is that, according to Behr's reading of Gregory, the creation of man is not ended (finished) but it has an end (a goal), which will later be fulfilled in Christ.

Thanks to his dual genesis, the human being is the 'span'³⁴ between the divine nature and animal life, participating in both.³⁵ Man is therefore "a twofold being, intellectual and corporeal, with the particularities of being male and female". The question then remains: "if the purpose of God is to make a human being in accordance with his image (Gen. 1:26), and in the Prototype there 'is not male and female' (Gal. 3:28), why and for what purpose did God also make the human being 'male and

³¹ John Behr, *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*, Oxford Early Christian Texts, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

³² "And God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him. He created them male and female." (Gen 1:27), and in Greek: "καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον, κατ' εἰκόνα θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτόν, ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς." (Gen 1:27).

³³ Behr, *On the divine image*, 104.

³⁴ Fr. Behr justifies his translation here: "The word translated here as 'span' is τὸ μέσον, which a little later (*De hom.* 16.9) Gregory uses to describe the human being; the word is usually translated as 'mid-point' or 'middle', indicating not so much something (a third thing) between two separate points or beings, but as that which also touches and so includes both, hence I have opted for 'span'." *Ibid.*, 223.

³⁵ "While two [elements]—the divine and incorporeal nature [φύσεως], and the irrational and animal life [ζωῆς]—are separated from each other as extremes, humankind is the span [μέσον]. For there is to be beheld in the human compound a share of each of those mentioned—of the divine, the rational and intelligent, which does not admit the distinction of male and female; of the irrational, the bodily formation and construction, divided into male and female—for each of them is certainly in all that partakes of human life [ζωῆς]. But the intellectual takes precedence [προτερεῦειν], as we have learnt from one who gives in detail an ordered account of the origin of the human being [ἀνθρωπογονίαν]; participation and kinship with the irrational is concomitant to being human [ἐπιγεννηματικὴν δὲ εἶναι τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ], for he first says that 'God made the human being in accordance with the image' of God, showing by what was said, just as the Apostle says, that in such a being 'there is no male and female', then he adds the particularities of human nature [τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως τὰ ἰδιώματα], that 'male and female he made them'. (*De hom.* 16.9)".

female’?”³⁶ St. Gregory’s answer is that “this assimilation to the less rational is a provision made in anticipation of the divinely foreseen waywardness of the human will.” Regarding reproduction St. Gregory writes that God knew:

“by his visionary power the [human] will not be keeping a straight course towards the good and, because of this, falling away from the angelic life [ζωή], in order that the multitude of human souls should not be cut short, by falling from that mode [τοῦ τρόπου] by which the angels increased to a multitude, for this reason he formed in our nature that device for increase [τῆς αὐξήσεως ἐπίνοιαν ἐγκατασκευάζει τῇ φύσει] appropriate to those who had slipped into sin, implanting in humanity, instead of the angelic nobility, the animal and irrational mode of succession from one another.”³⁷

Behr questions this passage asking “Does the human become like a beast when (and because) God implants this device for increase, or when the (twofold) human no longer directs his will towards the good, but assimilates himself to the animals, and in that way becomes like a beast? And if God did indeed form in our nature this device for procreation before the human turned away from the good, were humans in fact ever able to multiply ‘as the angels’?”

Behr doesn’t think that the pre-lapsarian angelic state that St. Gregory of Nyssa suggests as “another mode” can actually be justified. For him, the “other” mode of generation is not historical but eschatological.³⁸ He argues that, if we understand that “it is only when God ‘divided’ the human being into male and female that he bestowed the power of increasing and multiplying, just as he had earlier done with the animals”, therefore “any suggestion that humans might have multiplied otherwise is finally, scripturally, and definitively excluded”³⁹. He even quotes Von Balthasar as saying that St. Gregory’s asexual mode of reproduction should be interpreted as a ‘mythical’ way of expressing the real in God’s realm of possibilities, although he admits that in other places he links procreation with sin.⁴⁰

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁸ To start by looking for the prelapsarian state and the fall and its effect is to begin with protology, as many interpreters of Gregory (and also Origen, as we noted in the last chapter) do, rather than eschatology. Looking to the end to see what it is that the human being is to become—the one who is first in the foreknowledge of God, the archē that is Christ, but the end in our own temporal horizon of growth, our telos—Gregory contemplates the current state of existence, but also provides a vision of the singular economy of God that leads, in the end, to the outcome envisioned from the beginning.”, J. Behr, *On the Human Image*, 121.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa* (San Francisco, Calif: Ignatius Press, 1995), 174 and 73-4.

In a previous paper⁴¹, Behr wrote that we are dealing with two categories of procreation: the first in the biology of Adam, as male and female and another on in Christ, through Baptism, as human beings (*anthropoi*), completing the original act of creation of man, as we noted earlier.⁴²

“The fact that procreation is not “in Christ” is not due to fallenness, sinfulness, or passion, as it would be in a “Plan A/Plan B” model, where it might be claimed that sexual procreation is only the result of the fall, and that before the fall we had another, non-sexual manner, mode of procreation. No, it is simply a different category: procreation is in Adam, while birth into life is a passage from Adam to Christ; procreation continues the race of Adam, begetting sons and daughters of Adam, while baptism is the filling up of the body of Christ with martyrs, living human beings. It is this distinction that Saints Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus allude to when they suggest that perhaps there was another mode known to God for the genesis of human beings besides procreation as males and females.”⁴³

Behr considers that the male-female binary is not primarily focused on reproduction. He suggested that the purpose of creating the male and female genders, even sexuality itself, goes beyond the basic need for procreation and the perpetuation of the human species. Rather, sexual attraction and desire provide an opportunity for both men and women to transcend their individual selves and grow more toward becoming fully human (*anthropoi*) in the context of Christ. “Through sexual attraction and desire, then, most males and females are called to overcome themselves, and so become human in Christ.”⁴⁴ According to the author, children provide an extra opportunity for lifting up the cross but are not the sole purpose of marriage and sexuality.

Conclusions

In its classical interpretation, St. Gregory’s vision doesn’t explore the full potential of human sexuality; however, it doesn’t render sexuality, nor pleasure, as inherently sinful, but as something needed in our current lower state, which eventually, has to be transcended.

The new reading of Fr. John Behr adds an important eschatological element to the previous predominantly protological readings of St. Gregory of Nyssa, introducing the idea of the two-fold genesis of the human person: first biological, as male and

⁴¹ John Behr, “From Adam to Christ: From Male and Female to Being Human,” in *The Wheel*, no. 13/14 (2018): 19-32.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

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female, and second Christological, as human beings through baptism. This view renders sexuality as a positive and formative force in the fulfilment of the full human potential, since the dynamics of the eros that unites the two, moves them out of one's self and closer to the other, leading them further on the way of the cross.

Augustine's theology of original sin and sexuality, although more nuanced than the popular belief allows it, remains poorly understood and even distorted in Western theology. As such, it remains the basis for the overall perception of sexuality in general, and pleasure in particular, as sinful. This perception has become pervasive in the West and, as we were able to exemplify, has even spilled over even into Orthodox theology, influencing its thinking on the subject.