

## Claudio Moreschini (Pisa)

### THE CHRISTIAN PLATONISM OF GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS

Platonism is a very important element of Gregory of Nazianzus' philosophy and theology, perhaps more than of Basil's. We can find in his speeches, letters and poems elements of cynicism and of stoicism, but neither cynic ethic nor the Porch's philosophy have been useful, for Gregory, to elaborate his theology. It is true that in a letter sent to his friend Philagrius (about 369) Gregory shows his high opinion about Stoic ethic, but his words do not possess a deep knowledge of it. Opposing himself to the lack (as he thinks) of high spirit of aristotelian ethic, he says<sup>1</sup>:

"On the contrary, I appreciate the boldness and the courage of Stoic philosophers, who teach that circumstances do not prevent us from reaching happiness, because man is happy even if Phalaris' bull keeps him inside and burns him".

These short sentence doesn't mean a lot: these are commonplaces, which Gregory learnt at school, as the examples of extraordinary virtues possessed by Anaxarchus, Epictetus and Socrates, which he soon quotes. And it has been observed that Gregory with strictness and sternness undervalues human body and in so doing he is following cynic and stoic doctrines, which he admires. But condemnation of the flesh (which, however, may be inspired by Christian asceticism), doesn't contradict Gregory's platonism, since, after all, it had been proposed earlier than by the Stoa, namely in the *Phaedo*.

Belonging to the same kind of philosophy which Gregory might have learnt at school, may be considered his criticism of Aristotle, which we occasionally find<sup>2</sup>. Gregory blames Aristotle's trivialities in ethic, because that philosopher, as he writes to his friend Philagrius, said that material goods (*ta exothen*) are necessary to happiness. But scholastic platonism since II<sup>nd</sup> century a.D. (we can read, for instance, what Atticus the philosopher says on such topic) frequently expressed such critics on Aristotle, and Gregory might have learned it from contemporary platonism, and apart from ethic, the Cappadocian Fathers did not use, as a whole, aristotelian thought. Therefore Gregory, when used Greek philosophy for his theology, had only Plato at his disposition.

But when we speak of Gregory's platonism, we must pay care and not go in search for single words or sentences, as it had been done in XIX century and at the beginning of XX<sup>th</sup>, though we may still find a Platonic sentence which escaped the attention of the *Quellenforschung*. We must ascertain *how* the great Platonic tradition has been employed by Gregory. For instance, some words and some doctrines which *in their origin* really are Platonic, had become typical of the rhetoric culture in IV<sup>th</sup> century, Christian or pagan as well: we remember the idea that the human body is the prison of the soul, or that the ascension to the noetic reality is done through the 'wings' of the soul, and so on<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, when these imagines are employed by Gregory, they can't be considered as a prove of his assent to platonism.

Other questions need to be considered. First, in Gregory's works we find assertions of enmity towards Greek philosophy and namely Plato, even when he employs Platonic philosophy. Such a behaviour, which apparently is a contradiction, is a document of the opposition, long before Gregory already underlined in the Epistle to the Colossians (2,8), between the new, Christian, *forma mentis*, and the Greek *paideia* devoted to the idols. Such an opposition is a commonplace in the whole Christian literature, in the East as in the West, and we can find it in Basil, the master of Gregory, whose *Oratio ad adulescentes* is a well-known example of such a problem and of solution usually proposed by those

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *epist.* 32,9 Gallyay.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *orat.* 27,10; *epist.* 32,5.

<sup>3</sup> Such topics have been at length studied by P. Courcelle in his famous book on *Connais-toi toi meme*, Paris 1974-1975.

Christians writers who were not ready to condemn their *paideia in toto*. Besides, some Platonic doctrines (for instance, that of the eternity of the world and of the preexistence of matter) could not be accepted by a Christian thinker. Gregory's platonism, therefore, could not be without reserves.

Another question is the literary-rhetoric aspect of Gregory's works, which has often been underlined by critics. In consideration of his interest for rhetoric, which was warm indeed, critics did not think possible that Gregory could really have studied Plato or Greek philosophy. To consider rhetoric overwhelming in Gregory's works has become a sort of *communis opinio*, but this is not convincing, since it involves a contradiction between rhetoric and philosophy which existed only in a theoretical way, but wasn't put in effect neither by Gregory nor by other among his contemporaries. Indeed, Gregory is, as a writer and as a poet, much more 'artist' than Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, but such a quality doesn't mean that he is unable to elaborate a speculation of his own. It has been noted that Gregory's christology prepares some orthodox propositions of the Chalcedonian doctrine: this means that he was able to elaborate a 'philosophy', *notwithstanding* his skill in rhetoric refinement.

If we compare the so called 'theologian speeches' (*theologicae orationes*, nn. 27-31) of Gregory with texts of analogous subject, for instance with Athanasius' *Contra Arianos*, we are obliged to conclude that Gregory's *orationes* are on a much higher level, if considered from the point of view not only of literary elaboration, but also of the deepness of speculation. If Gregory wrote (that is, spoke) *orationes*, not theological treatises, this has no significance for his thought, but it has for his teaching: Gregory prefers, indeed, to communicate *directly* to his Christian public than to write for unknown people: he is the founder of the *oratoria sacra*.

And now some considerations on his Platonism.

1. Man's wish to ascent to God is the consequence of the natural love which moves every creature towards his Creator: God is "the summit of the realities which our mind can think, and towards Him is moved our wish (*epheisis*)"<sup>4</sup>; or "our mind wishes to ascend to Him"<sup>5</sup>. This idea has a Plotinian origin, as we can see in this sentence: "everything, indeed, is longing for it (scl., the One) and wishes to reach it for the necessity of its nature"<sup>6</sup>.

2. That God's nature is absolutely unknowable is an axiom present in all patristic thought, but, contrasting to such certainty, the Christian must speculate about Him. Therefore, in spite of His transcendence and the limits of human thought, God's nature can be somehow understood (*katalepté*) by our mind. As a consequence, we find an assertion which is typical of Gregory's theology and of his attitude towards Greek philosophy, since he interprets it in a quite Christian way. Important is the following statement:

"to think anything about God is difficult, but to speak of Him is impossible, according to the philosophy of a Greek theologian, a statement of a wise man, in my opinion"<sup>7</sup>.

It is easy to see that Gregory is hinting at Plato, namely at a famous sentence of the *Timaeus* (28c); besides, it is important that he, as every Christian thinker, from the apologetic onward, approves such Platonic sentence. But he continues:

"but in my opinion, to speak about God is impossible, and to think anything of him, still more impossible".

Here we have a modification of the Platonic doctrine, which means that a 'negative theology' is a dogma for Gregory, but *it was not* for Plato. Therefore Gregory takes an important sentence from the Platonic *Timaeus*, and, at the same time, he modifies it in a Christian way, piously emphasizing divine transcendence. Elsewhere he says<sup>8</sup>:

"In effect, to think about God is difficult and to explain Him to others is impossible":

here he seems to be nearer to the true meaning of the Platonic sentence.

<sup>4</sup> *Orat.* 21,1.

<sup>5</sup> *Orat.* 28,17.

<sup>6</sup> *Enn.* V, 5,12.

<sup>7</sup> *Orat.* 28,4.

<sup>8</sup> *Orat.* 32,14.

Again<sup>9</sup>:

"God is the sea of being (*pelagos ousias*), which transcend every idea of time and of nature: he appears in an obscure way only to our mind, and in a way even too gloomy and troubled, when we move not from what He is, but from what is around Him. ... Infinite, then, is God, and difficult is the contemplation of Him, and of Him only one thing is really comprehensible, his infinity, even if some think that, since He is simple in His nature<sup>10</sup>, he is completely incomprehensible or easily comprehensible"<sup>11</sup>.

We just said that this Platonic sentence had been warmly accepted by Christian speculation from the earliest times. Indeed, we can find it not only in the Platonic philosophy of the Imperial age, but also in an important thinker who had a Judaic and a Greek education, namely Philo of Alexandria<sup>12</sup>. It is not improbable that Gregory read, beside Plato, also Philo, whose books he might have found in that city, where he lived some years during his youth<sup>13</sup>.

We conclude that Gregory might have found in many texts, pagan and Christian as well, the doctrine that God is in no way comprehensible, though it is probable (of course) that the Christian tradition had had for him a greater significance; but, in a deeper consideration, it is clear that Gregory can be considered, like many others, a Platonist, a Platonist in his Christian peculiarities.

As a conclusion, Gregory maintains that, since He cannot be known, we can only say that God exists. This is clearly said in an important passage<sup>14</sup>:

"So, we can assert that 'He who is' (cf. Exod. 3,14) and 'God' are, in same way, the names of divine substance, and first "He who is". We investigate God's nature, which permits His being to exist for himself, not depending from any other; being, on the contrary, is really specific of God and is His peculiar possession, neither limited nor interrupted by anything which is before or after Him, because such a thing does not exist".

This doctrine, too, Gregory probably found in the tradition of the Alexandrian school: it is present in Philo<sup>15</sup> and in Origen<sup>16</sup>. But it can be found in Plotinus too:

"After you have eliminated every thing; after you have said nothing on It; after you have not said anything false about it, as if something were near It, you must only leave the word 'it is'<sup>17</sup>.

And again<sup>18</sup>:

"But our condition is that we can say something *about It*, but we cannot say *It*. Indeed, we can say what It is not, while, what It really is, we do not say".

We cannot state an imitation of Plotinus by Gregory, but we can say that Plotinus, on one side (that is, the pagan side), and Gregory by the Christian one, assert a postulate which is typical of late Platonism, namely that in no way we can say what God is. In order to emphasize his conviction, Gregory quotes Exodus 3,14, which, in his opinion, means that we know only that God exists, not what He is<sup>19</sup>.

As a conclusion, human mind cannot be satisfied with the bare statement that God is absolutely unknowable, but tries to know Him somehow. The only possibility we have is to know God from his works. Of course, this way of knowing God is narrow and isn't a real *gnosis*, but it has some value, if we consider how poor and limited is human mind. This way of knowing God is a 'second navigation' (*deuteros plous*), as we can read in Plato's *Phaedo*. But it was proposed to Christians by Paul (cf. Rom 1,29), and already by the judaeo-hellenistic Book of Wisdom.

<sup>9</sup> *Orat.* 38,7.

<sup>10</sup> See below, p.- \*\*.

<sup>11</sup> The same doctrine can be found in *orat.* 28,10-11; 40,5; *Hymn. ad Deum* I,1,29,3 (PG 507).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Quis rerum divinarum haeres* 170; *de mutatione nominum* 7. 10.14; *Quod Deus sit immutabilis* 62.

<sup>13</sup> About the presence of Philo in Christian writers, see the book of D. Runia, ...

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Orat.* 30,18.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *De somniis* 1, 230-231; *Quod Deus sit immutabilis* 62 and 160.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *De oratione* 24; *Iohann. Comm.* II, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Enn.* V, 5,13.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Enn.* V, 3,14.

<sup>19</sup> This assertion is frequently repeated by Gregory: cf. *orat.* 28,5; 28. 8-9.

3. Though God is "He who is" and possesses the true being, God's being is not like ours. This assertion is a Christian transformation of a neoPlatonic doctrine, as we read it in this passage<sup>20</sup>:

"God is the most beautiful and high being, unless we prefer to put Him even above being or to think He possesses the whole being, from Whom existence comes to others".

Already Plato (cf. *Resp.* 508a ss.) had said that the idea of Good is 'beyond being' (*epekeina ousias*), and this statement had been repeated by Plotinus: so, for Gregory, God's being is not our being. Moreover, God possesses the whole being and from Him it comes to other things to be. We think that Gregory's statement can be explained in that the Cappadocian Father attributes to God what Plotinus had attributed to the second hypostasis, namely to Nous: for Plotinus too the Nous possesses the whole being, while the One, just because it is beyond Nous, is also beyond being.

But the passage just now quoted from *oratio* 6, and another from *oratio* 38, have a deep theological significance, since they connect God with eternity. We do not mean (of course) that God is, according to Gregory, eternal: that would be trivial indeed. We mean that eternity is understood as the absolute plenitude of being, in opposition to time, which is, according to Plato and the Stoics, the measure of the movement of the sun and the stars (cf. *Timaeus* 37d). These are Gregory's words:

"God always was, is and will be, or, to speak more exactly, always is. 'He was' and 'He will be' are parts of time, which is connected with us and with the reality which is in coming-to-be. God, on the contrary, always *is*, and He calls Himself by this name ... He includes and contains in Himself the whole being, which neither had a beginning nor will finish, as if He were a sea of being (*pelagos ousias*), without end and without limits ..."<sup>21</sup>.

To sum up: God is "He who is" and His being is different from the limited being *now*, which is typical of creatures, which are born and perish. God's 'being now' is His possession of the whole being, of the sea of being. Therefore future is not a characteristic of God; past and future can be predicated only of creatures. God's infinite 'being now' is eternity, while creatures' 'being now' is time, which is measured by the movement of the sun and of the stars.

Now, this distinction between time and eternity is, in its origin, Platonic: in *Timaeus* 37d, in effect, Plato says the time is the moving image of eternity, which, in its nature, remains immovable. In the Platonic tradition, the same doctrine had been proposed by Plotinus. This philosopher said that time belongs to things which are born and perish, and had attributed eternity to the intelligible world, which possesses the totality of being and excludes future, since it is not possible that in the intelligible world there is something which before was not present there, nor something which would come thereafter. These are Plotinus' words:

"Therefore that reality which was not and will not be, but only *is*, that reality which possesses an immovable being because it does not go to the 'it will be' and never has come from the 'it was', this reality is eternity. And the life, which is in the reality which is in the being, I mean the whole and complete and full life, is just what we are searching, that is, eternity. And we must not think that eternity comes from outwards to join such reality, since it is that reality, it is a product of it and is together with it"<sup>22</sup>.

And again:

"It is not possible that one thing is 'being', another 'always being': therefore being possesses 'always being' and, so we say, 'what is always'. As a consequence, we must understand 'always' as 'what really is' and we must think that always is in that reality which is unitary and needs nothing besides what it has, since it has everything"<sup>23</sup>.

As a consequence, according to Plotinus, time, since it is the image of eternity, as Plato had said, is connected with the life of the cosmic soul<sup>24</sup>. So, when he explains what time is<sup>25</sup>, Gregory doesn't follow Plotinus, but returns to the ancient definition of Plato and the Stoics, viz. that time is measured by the

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *orat.* 6,12.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *orat.* 38,8.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Enn.* III, 7,3, p. 372,2 Henry – Schwyzer.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 376, 29 ff.

<sup>24</sup> This issue has been discussed also by St. Augustine's *Confessiones*; as is well known.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *oratio* 38,8.

movement of the sun. Most likely Gregory couldn't accept plotinian doctrine of the cosmic soul, while the hypostasis of the Nous could be adapted into Christian theology.

4. Now let us consider other enunciations in Gregory's theology, which come from platonism.

Among definitions of God we can find:

- God is 'the first beautiful' (*orat.* 2,76; 6,12; 7,17; 31,15), cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* I,6,7; III, 7,4.
- God's nature is explained by words constituted by the preverb *auto-*: *autoagiotes*, "saintity itself" (*orat.* 25,16); *autodynamos* ("the energy itself", said of the Holy Spirit in *orat.* 41,9); *autokalos* ("the beauty itself", *orat.* 4,60); *autoagathotes* ("the Goodness itself", *orat.* 41,9); *autokatharsis* ("the Purity itself", *orat.* 40,29).
- Divine nature is 'simple', viz. unitary and uniform. It is impossible that in it there are parts or differences, because difference would imply what is not divine, that is a lack of divinity, and, on the other side, division means imperfection, as Origen had already said<sup>26</sup>. God, then, is not a composed nature, and, as such, He has as His proper characteristic, simplicity (*oratio* 38,7; 40,7). He is "identical in His substance" (*oratio* 6,13); "unity belongs to His nature" (*oratio* 22,14); "angels receive from Holy Trinity not only their nature, which is light as God's, but also to be a unit (*oratio* 6,13).
- The doctrine of divine 'simplicity' had been taught also by the other Cappadocian Fathers: so Basil says that Holy Spirit is 'simple' (*De Spiritu sancto* 6, 15); and 'without parts' (*ibid.* 9,22); "He is not composed" (*ibid.* 18,45); Gregory of Nyssa speaks of "the nature of beautiful, which is simple and immovable" (*De virginitate* 11,2). And we can compare Plotinus' statements: "the nature of Good, which is simple and comes first" (*Enn.* II, 9,1); "the One manifests the simplicity which is in every thing" (V, 5,6); the Nous is "the simple and first being" (V, 5,10); the One is "the reality which is completely simple and first of all thing" (V, 3,1).
- Proposing an obvious tenet of the Christian faith, that God is the highest goodness, Gregory makes a clear hint to a famous Platonic sentence (*Phaedrus* 247a, and cf. also *Timaeus* 29e): "envy is excluded out of gods' chorus". This quotation appears in Gregory's *oratio* 28, 11<sup>27</sup>.

5. If until now we saw that Gregory's theology takes in great account Platonic and plotinian doctrines and sentences, however he manifests a substantial opposition to Plotinus as far as an important side of Christian theology is concerned. We consider a famous passage in *oratio* 29,2:

"Surely, about the Son's generation we dare not speak of an overflowing of goodness, as it has been boldly asserted by a Greek philosopher, namely that 'a cup overflowed': these are his very words, where he philosophizes about the first and the second principle. If we say so, we would run the risk of introducing the Father who doesn't want the generation of the Son, and, so to say, we would speak of an outgrowth of His nature, which cannot be avoided. Now, all these doesn't fit Christian theology".

This passage is not easy. The image of the cup is really Platonic (we can read it in *Timaeus* 41d), but it is not employed in a discussion about the first and the second principle, as Gregory has said. On the other side, the word *υπερερρηγη*, which is employed by Gregory to indicate the 'overflowing' of divine nature, is really used by Plotinus in his treatise *On the first and the second Beautiful*, that is *Enneads* V, 2,1<sup>28</sup>. These are Plotinus' words:

"Since the first Beautiful is perfect, because it requires nothing and needs nothing, it overflowed, so to say, and its redundancy created another principle".

It is probable that Gregory confused Plato's image of the cup with Plotinus' image of overflowing: when he spoke *oratio* 29, of course he hadn't at hand neither Plato nor Plotinus and he made a quotation by memory. However Gregory explicitly refuses plotinian emanationism: the Son's generation is not the product of the Father's admirable and abundant goodness. If we thought so, we could also infer that, if the Father had not wanted it, He wouldn't have generated the Son. The overflowing of goodness, of which Plotinus speaks (and Plotinus, more exactly, says that the One, not the Goodness, overflowed),

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *De principiis* I, 1,6.

<sup>27</sup> And also in Athanasius, *De incarn.* 3 and 42.-

<sup>28</sup> The title of this treatise is not similar to that which Gregory knows, but the title of the arabic translation of it is analogous: *On the first and the second Cause*.

manifests itself only *ad extra*, that is *out* of the divine nature. Indeed, in another passage (*oratio* 38,9) we read:

"Since to Goodness was not enough its moving in the contemplation of Herself, but it was necessary that the good overflowed and proceeded (ξεθῆ'ναι ... και; οὐδευ'σαι), so that there were a greater number of creatures who could receive a benefit from Her, and this is the characteristic of the highest goodness, so God creates angelic and celestial powers ...".

So Gregory gives a Christian interpretation of Plotinus' emanatistic philosophy: according to Plotinus, the One, thanks to its perfection and its overflowing, creates the Nous, the noetic world; according to Gregory, God – not the Father – in His overflowing goodness creates the angelic and celestial powers (that is, not the second principle, that is, not the Son). As a consequence, divine goodness, as a whole, works *ad extra*, not *into* Trinity, as if the Son were generated thanks the overflowing goodness of the Father. The Father begets by effect of His nature, not by effect of His goodness or His will.

So, to conclude and to repeat what we had said at the beginning of our short considerations, we must not speak of 'the platonism of Gregory of Nazianzus', which had been the object of the *Quellenforschung* in the nineteenth century, but how such platonism had been employed, and, if necessary, modified, by the great Cappadocian Father. Of course Plato was for Gregory, as it had been for many before him and it will be after him, the Greek thinker who had come nearest the Christian doctrine, but such a value was not sufficient to suggest, for a Christian theologian, a slavish attitude towards Plato. And we must thank Gregory for his independence, which granted Christian thought a new impulse<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> In this paper we proposed, in a new draft and correcting some details, what was scattered in our book on *Filosofia e letteratura in Gregorio di Nazianzo*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1997.