

Awakening Wonder:

A Classical Guide to
**TRUTH,
GOODNESS &
BEAUTY**



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Series Editor: Stephen R. Turley, PhD





***Awakening Wonder:
A Classical Guide to Truth, Goodness, and Beauty***

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The entire object of true education is to make people not merely do the right things, but enjoy the right things—not merely industrious, but to love industry—not merely learned, but to love knowledge—not merely pure, but to love purity—not merely just, but to hunger and thirst after justice.

—John Ruskin, *The Crown of Wild Olive: Three Lectures on Work, Traffic, and War*



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INTRODUCTION

[I]f the too obvious, so straight branches of Truth and Good are crushed or amputated and cannot reach the light—yet perhaps the whimsical, unpredictable, unexpected branches of Beauty will make their way through and soar up *to that very place* and in this way perform the work of all three. And in that case it was not a slip of the tongue for Dostoevsky to say that “Beauty will save the world,” but a prophecy.

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Beauty Will Save the World:
The Nobel Lecture on Literature”

Resounding at the height of the Cold War, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s words served as an invitation to the world order of his day to reconsider the nature of reality in a way radically different from the coercion and manipulation inherent in political power. These words were a summons for the Soviet East and the democratic West to remember an identity that both civilizations once shared but that had in the course of the twentieth century been eclipsed by secular statism. Solzhenitsyn’s speech was a call for the world to return to Beauty, the effulgent or illuminative manifestation of the loveliness, the delectableness, the delightfulness of the True and the Good. For it is here, in the splendor of Beauty, that our ideological abstractions are relativized by a sacramental imagination that lifts us up collectively into an indissoluble union with the divine source of life. This, for Solzhenitsyn, is the redeeming nature of art through which, regardless of the secular eclipse of Truth and Goodness, Beauty still shines for all to see.

That Beauty serves as an invitation is not new. It has long been recognized that the classical Greek term for “Beauty,” *kallos*, is related etymologically to the verb *kalein*, “to call.” However, if we are to accept such an invitation, then we are going to have to familiarize ourselves with concepts, vocabulary, and frames of reference that have been largely lost underneath the massive secular colossus that constitutes the modern world. The task will not be easy, but the current classical Christian education renewal provides an exciting and promising context for just such a retrieval.

It is within this trajectory of invitation that I have written this guide. It is an invitation to teacher, parent, and student to throw away the current secular nonsense that pervades so much of what passes as education today, and instead to encounter a world filled with awe and wonder, to cultivate a particular human life that embodies Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, which begins at the fountain of worship and flows out into unlimited cultural pursuits that awaken the divinely imparted meaning of the cosmos and thereby voice creation’s praise. It is an invitation to cultivate a life of human flourishing, and thus to be a living testimony that Christ is risen and that God’s inextinguishable love has in fact broken into our world. It is an invitation for students to discover that they are in fact citizens of a heavenly city, a global Christian civilization, a sacred space where imaginations are sanctified and senses are redeemed that even now celebrates and anticipates the divine renewal of all things.

To this end, I shall develop an extended primer on the conceptual and historical relationship among Truth, Goodness, and Beauty and their shaping of our humanity in a distinctively Christian educational project. Chapter 1 sets the stage with a historical overview of our civilizational context, one that has emptied objective value from our experience of the world and redefined radically the nature of what it means to be human. Chapter 2 takes us back to the historical source of objective values in the classical world, with a focus on the unprecedented con-

tribution of Plato to the development of the divine nature of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful and the educational project by which such values are imparted to students. Chapters 3 and 4 survey the Christian recalibration of these values around the Incarnation of Christ and the revelation of the Trinity in the formative period of Christian orthodoxy, as represented by key contributors from both the Greek East and the Latin West. Chapter 5 examines the subjective appropriation of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Christian development of what we shall call the “redemption of the senses.” Chapter 6 explores the significance of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the consecration of the imagination in what we shall call the “moral imagination.” Finally, chapter 7 outlines a number of aesthetic suggestions for the teaching of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in such a way that awakens wonder and awe in the imaginations of student and teacher alike.

And so let us together answer this invitation, one that calls all of us to a particular kind of life, a life of true and flourishing humanity in the midst of a cosmos redeemed in Christ, a journey that makes its way through and soars up to that light by which we see light.



CHAPTER ONE

A Tale of Two Civilizations

WATERFALLS AND THE WORLD

In 1944 a book critiquing the state of British education was published, titled *The Abolition of Man*. The author was C. S. Lewis. His critique was initiated by a textbook, which he leaves unnamed, calling it *The Green Book*, written by two authors he also leaves unnamed, referring to them as Gaius and Titius. The authors of this book recount poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous visit to the Falls of the Clyde in Scotland in the early 1800s. As Coleridge stood before the waterfall, he overheard the responses of two tourists: one remarked that the waterfall was "sublime," while the other said it was "pretty." Coleridge mentally endorsed the first judgment and rejected the second with disgust. Gaius and Titius then offer their own commentary on this scene:

When the man said *That is sublime*, he appeared to be making a remark about the waterfall. . . . Actually . . . he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying was really *I have feelings associated in my mind with the word "Sublime,"* or shortly, *I have sublime feelings.* . . . This confusion is continually present in language as we use it. We appear to be saying something very important about something; and actually we are only saying something about our own feelings.¹

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 2.

For Lewis, this comment by Gaius and Titius had nothing less than cosmic consequences. The waterfall scene and the commentary captured, in microcosmic fashion, *two contrasting conceptions of the world*: one, represented by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, that affirmed Beauty as an objective value embedded in a created cosmic order and recognized by a humanity that participates in that cosmic order; the other, represented by Gaius and Titius and *The Green Book*, that denied objective value in impersonal nature and located all conceptions of Beauty and sublimity to the human mind and to personal preference. In the former, Beauty is a value that exists objective to the knower and in which the knower participates by virtue of his createdness; in the latter, Beauty is a value constructed by the knower and superimposed on an impersonal world. For Lewis, these two perspectives represent nothing less than two fundamentally different human projects constituting two fundamentally different ages or civilizations: what we might call the *moral* age versus the *modern* age, or the *sapient* age versus the *scientific* age.

COSMIC PIETY

The key problem that Lewis was trying to diagnose for the reader is that the collapse of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty into subjective processes and private preferences is inextricably linked to the collapse of meaning in the modern age. Just a cursory survey of classic literary texts from cultures all over the world demonstrates that humanity once shared the perspective that the world in which we live was very much brimming with divine life. This diaphanous world eventually formed a particular kind of social orientation and disposition, what classical scholars André-Jean Festugière and Jean Pépin call “cosmic piety,” which was nearly universal in the Greco-Roman world. For the Greeks, there was a profound sense that one was truly human only to the extent that

one lived in a harmonious relationship with the cosmos.² This piety entailed that every person born into the world was born with a divine obligation; we were all born into a morally defined cosmic order and were thus obliged to live in a way concomitant with that moral order.

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty were not merely subjective preferences or private opinions but rather three distinct yet interrelated manifestations of the divine reality of the cosmos.

It is from this world, particularly the Greek world, that our conceptions of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful emerged. Truth, Goodness, and Beauty were not merely subjective preferences or private opinions but rather three distinct yet interrelated manifestations of the divine reality of the cosmos.³ It was believed that by embodying the True, Good, and Beautiful through the Greek educational project known as *paideia*, students cultivated a virtuous balance in their souls that reflected the balance of the cosmos. Having achieved such balance, students were thereby prepared to take their place in the *polis*, the Greek city-state, which served ideally as the substantiation of cosmic piety. Thus, everything involved in the culture of the *polis*—history, art, music, literature, economics, science, mathematics, politics—served as a palpable, substantial, and material embodiment

2. André-Jean Festugière, *Le Dieu Cosmique*, vol. II of *La Révélation D'Hermès Trismégiste* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1949); idem, *Personal Religion among the Greeks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 105–142; Jean Pépin, “Cosmic Piety,” in A. H. Armstrong and A. A. Armstrong, eds., *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, vol. 15 of *World Spirituality* (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 408–435.

3. It should be noted that while the terms *Truth*, *Goodness*, and *Beauty* are often associated with the classical world, their initial systematic treatments are not until the eighteenth century. Thus, the term complex is being used here and throughout the book as a heuristic tool to help illuminate the metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic constituents distinctive of a classical and Christian engagement with the world. See the discussion in Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 221–231. Cf. the statement by Victor Cousin, *Lectures on the true, the beautiful, and the good*, translated by O. W. Wight (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1861), 34: “Philosophy, in all times, turns upon the fundamental ideas of the true, the beautiful, and the good.”

of the divine meaning or purpose infused into the world, enabling the human soul to flourish.

With the emergence of Christian civilization, Christians tapped into this cosmic piety, but they also radically altered it. Christians certainly affirm that all people are born into a world of divine obligation; however, they introduce something wholly new by transferring this cosmic piety away from the planets and celestial spheres and imputing it onto Christ, who is the *Logos*, the new creation, in whom all things hold together and through whom God is revealed as the infinite fountain of Trinitarian love and delight. And it is the church, the *ekklesia*, that fulfills this divine obligation by reconstituting time and space around Christ through Word and sacrament, thus enabling us to fulfill our divine purpose and thereby become truly human.

SPLITTING THE WORLD APART

However, with the advent of the modern age, and more specifically the advancement of modern science, knowledge has become increasingly redefined in such a way so as to exclude any divine moral order. With the breakup of Christendom and the subsequent secularization of the university in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it became increasingly plausible to view knowledge as limited solely to what could be verified by a *method*, namely, the application of science and mathematics. It was argued that only those things that could be verified by the empirical method could be known in a way completely detached from the preconceptions of the observer. Anything that was not subjected to or failed this method was reduced to the state of person-relativity and excluded from the arena of what can be known. But there was a toll that had to be paid for this new knowledge: we collectively had to surrender the concept of meaning or purpose as a reality divinely embedded in a created order, since meaning was impervious to method; *telos* simply could not be placed in a test tube.

Thus, this new conception of knowledge in effect exposed all value systems as mere cultural fabrications. Science has uncovered a world governed not by the gods or any kind of divine meaning but rather by physical, chemical, and biological causal laws. “Objective” values are merely culturally specific meaning systems contrived by humans and imposed on an otherwise meaningless world operated by cause-and-effect processes. Far from an embodiment of divine meaning inherent in a diaphanous cosmos, culture is the collection of mechanisms composed of common symbols, practices, and arrangements shared among a distinct population by which meaning is imputed to an otherwise meaningless world. Modern science has therefore rent asunder what the classical imagination brought together: the physical world and the semiotic world, the world of nature and the world of culture, have been split apart from each other, such that what was once considered knowledge—indeed the highest form of knowledge, the contemplation of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful—is now appropriated as no more than private belief or personal preference.

Christians introduce something wholly new by transferring this cosmic piety away from the planets and celestial spheres and imputing it onto Christ.

And herein lies Lewis’s concern with *The Green Book*. If education is enculturation, as the Greeks observed, then *The Green Book* represents nothing less than the attempt to enculturate students into this modern vision of the world, a world known through the lens of empirical verifiability that must *by definition* turn students away from this vision of cosmic piety and cut them off from encountering the cosmic values of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Indeed, according to Gaius and Titius and *The Green Book*, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful are now whatever one wants them to be. We are all now born into a world where we have no divine obligations whatsoever apart from what we choose personally to impose on ourselves.

And yet Lewis observed that while moderns have in effect abandoned divine cosmology, the values specific to such a cosmos remain, lingering in our consciences and our expectations. We seem to expect that virtues will be operative in our society all the while rejecting their source. In Lewis's words:

And all the time—such is the tragic-comedy of our situation—we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more “drive,” or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or “creativity.” In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.⁴

We cannot teach our students that Truth is relative and expect our politicians to be honest; we can't claim that the Good has been replaced by situational ethics and expect our bankers to ground their business decisions in anything other than profit, greed, and expediency; and we cannot relegate Beauty to personal preference and then feign shock when we encounter a urinal as part of an art exhibit.

Lewis recognized profound consequences entailed in modern, value-neutral education. If all values are relegated to the person-relative, if all conceptions of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are collapsed into the subjective as personal preferences, then the only way there can be a moral consensus in society is through the use of coercion. If a sense of divine obligation and hence self-government has been erased, then only coercion, compulsion, and extortion can provide a motivation for ethical conformity. Thus, Lewis saw manipulation at the heart of this brave new world to which we are embarking. And if manipulation is an intrinsic characteristic of modern life, then there must surface by definition two classes of people: manipulators and manipulatees, or, in Lewis's terms,

4. Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 26.

the “conditioners” and the “conditioned.” The need for coercion and manipulation thus gives rise to the formation of a social elite, a secular aristocracy, with the vast majority of the human population repositioned as objects of manipulation. Thus, Lewis concluded that modern education enculturates students into a world constituted by conditioners and the conditioned, a new social order that subsumes the vast majority of humanity under the category of impersonal Nature, which in effect redefines humanity as inherently meaningless; hence the title of his book, *The Abolition of Man*.

THE WORLD MADE WHOLE

Lewis believed that the fate of human nature itself was dependent on our recovery of what he termed the *Tao*, the doctrine of objective values:

We have been trying, like Lear, to have it both ways: to lay down our human prerogative and yet at the same time to retain it. It is impossible. Either we are rational spirit obliged for ever to obey the absolute values of the *Tao*, or else we are mere nature to be kneaded and cut into new shapes for the pleasures of masters who must, by hypothesis, have no motive but their own “natural” impulses. Only the *Tao* provides a common human law of action which can over-arch rulers and ruled alike. A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery.⁵

If there is to be a recovery of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in our time, the chasm between nature and culture, the physical and the meaningful, will have to be bridged by a rediscovery of cosmic piety. It is my contention that the Incarnation provides just such a bridge, for

5. Ibid., 73. For an exceptional exploration of the cosmic values in the writings of C. S. Lewis, see Louis Markos, *Restoring Beauty: The Good, the True, and the Beautiful in the Writings of C. S. Lewis* (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2010).

it is in the Incarnation that we discover a union between the Word and the world, the physical and the semiotic, the natural and the cultural. The Incarnation thus invites us today, in a comparable manner to which it has invited previous generations, to reconsider our cultural memories and metaphysics, what we appropriate as fact and mere fable, what we construct as constituents of public life versus private life, and to encounter the world through a new conception of knowledge, one rooted in the sacramental revelation of the Trinity and the redemption of the human senses. Indeed, it is the Incarnation that beckons us not merely to a new way of knowing our world but to a new way of experiencing and encountering our world as it has been redeemed in Christ and restored proleptically in the shared life-world of the Church.

If a sense of divine obligation and hence self-government has been erased, then only coercion, compulsion, and extortion can provide a motivation for ethical conformity.

However, if we are to return to an Incarnationally informed encounter with Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, we must begin by rediscovering the basic frames of reference by which these cosmic values emerged in the Greco-Roman world and then see their development in the works of key Christian figures in both the Greek East and the Latin West. It is to these frames of reference that we now turn.

CHAPTER TWO

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Classical World

INTRODUCTION

In order to appreciate the role of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in our educational renewal, we have to understand the historical and social context in which these values emerged. This context provides a network of cosmic, anthropological, and social frames of reference that will serve as a model for our exploration of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty throughout our discussion.

COSMIC PIETY, THE HUMAN PERSON, AND THE *POLIS*

At the dawning of the first century, nearly universal throughout the Greco-Roman world was what we have called “cosmic piety,” the idea that the world is very much brimming with divine life. Because the cosmos is divine, every person is born into a world of divine obligation, such that one is obliged to conform one’s life into a harmonious relationship with the world and humanity. At the heart of this cosmology is the micro-macro relationship between the human body and the cosmos, in which the individual human person is a microcosmic replication, literally a *mikros kosmos*, of the substance and order of the macrocosmic world. Reciprocally, the cosmos is seen as a *macro-anthropos*, a cosmic human. This micro-

macro relationship originated with pre-Socratic philosophers, particularly Empedocles (490–430 BC), who is credited with being the first to systematize the four cosmic elements (earth, air, fire, water) with the four humors of the human body (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood).¹ Empedocles argued that the humors play a role in the human body analogous to that played by the elements in the world at large. In fact, classical medical theory as found in Alcmaeon, the Hippocratic corpus, Celsus, and Galen is based precisely on this micro-individual/macro-cosmic relationship, so that sickness or disease is considered an imbalance—a disorder—of the four humors, with health achieved by restoring balance—or symmetry—to the human body reflective of the symmetry of the cosmos.

Eventually, the *polis* or Greek city-state came to be seen as the integrative bridge between the microcosmic human person and the macrocosmic world. From Anaximander (611–546 BC) onward, a rhetorical motif developed that likened the city-state to the human body, such that the city was the individual “writ large”; the city in turn could be viewed as a microcosm, and the cosmos as a city.² The cosmic significance of the city-state was most explicit in the temples, which were considered architectural models of the cosmos. According to Dio Cassius, the magnificent cupola of the Pantheon was modeled after the heavens.³ Isidore of Seville similarly observed: “The Ancients used to make the roofs of their temples in the form of a tortoise shell; so as to represent the sky, which they could see was curved.”⁴ The third-century Neo-Platonist Porphyry described the mithraeum as “a model of the universe,” a miniature replica of the cosmos.⁵

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1. James Longrigg, *Greek Rational Medicine: Philosophy and Medicine from Alcmaeon to the Alexandrians* (London: Routledge, 1993), 53.
 2. M. R. Wright, *Cosmology in Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 71.
 3. Dio Cassius, *Roman History Vol. VI*, ed. and trans. by Earnest Cary. Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 53.27.2.
 4. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 15.8.8.
 5. Roger Beck, *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 41, quoted from Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 6.

These cosmic, anthropological, and civic frames of reference converged into the conception of a cosmic *koinonia* or communion. Plato (427–347 BC) illustrated this notion when he observed that *koinonia* is the basis for the preservation of the whole cosmos, such that “heaven and earth and gods and men are held together by communion and friendship.”⁶ Sacrifices and divination ceremonies are thus for the purpose of “communion between gods and men.”⁷ The city-state thus transforms into a cosmopolis. As particularly evident in Plato’s *Republic*, the cosmopolis was envisioned as conjoining and creating a harmony among the cosmos, human soul, and society.

These cosmic, anthropological, and civic frames of reference converged into the conception of a cosmic koinonia or communion.

This value that the Greeks placed on cosmic communion, a harmonious relationship between gods and men that perpetuated the vital life processes that sustained the world, gave rise to a distinct education project known as *paideia*. Flourishing in the fourth century BC, *paideia* had as its purpose the formation of a particular kind of human, one in which the heroic virtues, the *arête*—embedded particularly in the texts of Homer and Hesiod—were embodied in the hearts and the minds of students.⁸ The idea was that through embodying or imitating the virtues characteristic of cosmic piety, students would transform into citizens of the *polis* who could perpetuate this cosmic communion and realize human flourishing.

6. F. Hauck, “κοινός, κοινωνός, κοινωνέω, κοινωνία, συγκοινωνός, συγκοινωνέω, κοινωνικός, κοινώω,” in Gerhard Kittel et al., eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 3:799, quoted from Plato, *Gorgias* 507e, 508a.

7. Plato, *Symposium* 188b–c, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).

8. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944).

THE TRUE, THE GOOD, AND THE BEAUTIFUL

It is in this civilizational context that we first encounter the emergence of the cosmic values known as the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. The Greek term *aletheia* (“truth”) literally means “nonconcealment,” the negation of *lethein*, “to elude notice, to be unseen.”⁹ *Aletheia* thus connotes a sense of disclosure: “*truth* in the sense of the *unbiddenness* . . . and *disclosedness* of the state of affairs which exhibits itself and is therefore perceived in its actuality.”¹⁰ The term *agathos* (“good”) as an adjective connoted “the significance or excellence of a thing or person” and was eventually developed by philosophers to designate the goal, purpose, or meaning of existence.¹¹ Likewise, *kalos* (“beauty”) is generally rendered as “beautiful,” “healthy,” “excellent,” “strong,” or “good.”¹² It is during the fifth century BC that we find two of the three terms used together. For example, *kalos* is first used together with *agathos* in a political or social context: the *kaloi* and *agathoi* are leading citizens who embody the virtues of the *polis*, the Greek city-state. Indeed, the synonymy of the terms contracted into a single word, *kalokagathia*.

PLATO AND THE “SOCRATIC TRINITY”

However, it is not until the writings of Plato that these three terms converge into mutually interpreting concepts, in what has been termed the “Socratic trinity” or “Platonic triad.” Though Plato did not provide a systematic treatment of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, it is not coin-

9. Christopher P. Long, *Aristotle on the Nature of Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 26.

10. H. Hübner, “ἀλήθεια,” in Horst Balz et al, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1:57–60, 58.

11. Walter Grundmann, “ἀγαθός,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:10–17, 10–11.

12. Georg Bertram, “καλός,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:536–556.

cidental that the first clear presentation of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful historically comes from a fifteenth-century commentary on Plato's *Philebus* by the Italian humanist scholar Marsilio Ficino.¹³

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty for Plato were divine concepts; they make up what he called the *eidon*, the eternal transcendent world of the ideas or forms. This Socratic trinity is the eternal source of life in which the totality of our cosmos participates as an *eikon*, a temporal, finite image or icon of the eternal transcendent world of the Ideas or Forms. For Plato, the universe is very much alive, or at least inextricably bound up with divine activity, and is thereby considered an object of veneration. In the *Timaeus*, the world is animated by a rational soul, which is the macrocosmic basis for the microcosmic human soul.¹⁴ Humans, as microcosmic replications of the larger macrocosmic world, are composed of tripartite souls that loosely correspond to the Socratic trinity: *logos*, *thymos* or *ethos*, and *eros* or *epithymetes*. The *logos* involves our rational capacities; the *thymos* or *ethos* involves our emotional, ethical, or moral capacities; and the *epithymetes* or *eros* involves our desires and aesthetic capacities.¹⁵ And it is through the tripartite soul that was forged in the world of the forms before our birth and embodiment (Plato held more or less to a doctrine of reincarnation) that the individual human can mirror, reflect, or image the virtues of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, and thus exemplify and participate in divine life.

Now, for Plato, the dilemma is that we as tripartite souls already possess a knowledge of the virtues, literally the divine order of the eternal ideas or forms—the imprint—of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, but this knowledge has been forgotten as the result of our birth

13. Marsilio Ficino, *The Philebus Commentary*, trans. Michael J. B. Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 78, 110. On the development of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty as a Romantic response to the reductionist rationalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 221–231.

14. Plato, *Timaeus*, ed. and trans. by R.G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 33b, 36e, 41d.

15. Plato, *Republic* 435e8–9, 439e3–4, 439d5–7, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vols. 5 and 6, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

and embodiment. As he made clear in his *Meno*, knowledge does not derive from inductive or deductive processes or an investigation into the nature of things, but rather knowledge is a *recollection*, what Plato termed *anamnesis*, a recovery of Truth insofar as our souls have experienced it prior to our embodiment.¹⁶ So the key here is that knowledge needs to be *awakened*. And it is *philosophia*, the love of wisdom, that seeks to recover human perception of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful so as to restore the human soul to its participation in divine life. This pursuit of Truth in the *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias*, of Goodness in the *Republic*, and of Beauty in Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, in effect reorients the human person to the divine world of the eternal and immutable, and thereby effects a harmonious relationship with the cosmos, which itself participates in divine life.

THE PLATONIC CONCEPTION OF TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY

The precise relationship between the True, the Good, and the Beautiful in Plato is very difficult to determine, largely because these concepts are not treated systematically but rather are spread out among his works. But we can map out a broad, general model for how they work together in relation to the tripartite soul.

For Plato, the Good is not simply a thing or a value; the Good is universal priority in which all true things participate and from which they exist.

16. Plato, *Meno* 86b. See, e.g., John McGuckin, "The Notion of the Beautiful in Ancient Greek Thought and Its Christian Patristic Transfiguration," *The Voice of Orthodoxy* XIII, no. 5 (September–October 2009), available at www.thevoiceoforthodoxy.com/archives/articles/notion_of_the_beautiful.html.

In book VII of the *Republic*, Plato considered the Good to be the universal principle, the self-sufficient source of all being and the irreducible essence of reality:

[I]n the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of Good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic course of truth and reason.¹⁷

For Plato, the Good is not simply a thing or a value; the Good is universal priority in which all true things participate and from which they exist. The Good is “beyond being” and is thus the foundation of all hypotheses which requires no hypothesis; that Idea from which all Ideas emerge and on which they depend.¹⁸ According to his allegory of the cave in book VII of the *Republic*, the Good is to the world of Ideas much like what the sun is to our perceptible, physical world. As such, the Good, the divine source of life, is in itself unknowable, being the essence, the light, by which all things are known and perceived. The Good itself must thus be *revealed*; it must be communicated to the human mind by means of *aletheia* or “Truth.”¹⁹ Drawing from the allegory of the cave, we might say that Truth is the splendor of the Good that can be perceived by the soul.²⁰ For Plato, Truth involves understanding how all things in our world, all particulars, participate in and derive their nature from the Good.²¹ Thus, concomitant with

17. Plato, *Republic* 517b–c, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vols. 5 and 6, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

18. *Ibid.*, 509b, 510b, 511b, 526e. See Werner Beierwaltes, “The Love of Beauty and the Love of God,” in A. H. Armstrong and A. A. Armstrong, eds., *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, vol. 15 of *World Spirituality* (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 297–298.

19. The precise relationship between the Good and the True in Plato as particularly found in books VI and VII of the *Republic* is the object of considerable scholarly debate. On the various interpretations, see the overview in D. C. Schindler, *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* (Baltimore: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

20. Plato, *Republic* 508d.

21. *Ibid.*, 475e ff.

its etymology, it is the nature of Truth to *reveal* or *disclose* reality, the priority of the Good, to the human mind or *logos*.

However, the Good is not merely revealed to the mind through Truth. A desire, an *eros*, is awakened for the Good within the human soul through *kalos* or “Beauty.” In Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*, Beauty is the object of *eros* or love.²² And it is here that Plato revealed the means by which the soul encounters the True and the Good. In awakening *eros*, Plato’s conception of Beauty becomes inextricably linked with Grecian physics, in that *eros* constitutes the law of attraction. Empedocles had envisioned the cosmos as a whole and all the particulars within it, including humans, as directed by *eros* and *eris*, literally “desire” and “strife,” which served as the opposing forces of attraction and repulsion. In accordance with Greco-Roman physics, this love, this desire awakened through Beauty, serves the indispensable role of *momentum* or *motivation* in intellectual, moral, and spiritual pursuits. This is why we associate Beauty with “attraction”; through Beauty we are drawn to the True and the Good. By awakening *eros* within us, Beauty provides us with the allure, the momentum, the gravitational pull toward the True and the Good and thus unites us with the divine source of life:

When a man has been thus far tutored in the lore of love, passing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will have revealed to him, as he draws to the close of his dealings in love, a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature; and this, Socrates, is the final object of all those previous toils. . . . Beginning from obvious beauties he must for the sake of that highest Beauty be ever climbing aloft, as one the rungs of a ladder, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; from personal Beauty he proceeds to beautiful observances, from observance to beautiful learning, and from learning at last to that particular study which is concerned

22. Plato, *Symposium* 210a–d.

with the beautiful itself and that alone; so that in the end he comes to know the very essence of Beauty.²³

The important point here is that Beauty, because of its divine nature, is always linked with the True and the Good. In order for something to be truly beautiful, it must by definition draw one to the True and the Good. When *eros* or love is amputated from Truth and Goodness, say in the case of pornography, it is no longer love but rather lust or *epithymia*.²⁴ The Greeks alluded to this differentiation in the mythologies of the Muses and the Sirens: the Muses are the daughters of Zeus who inspire Beauty and Truth, while the Sirens are water nymphs who lure sailors to their deaths through their bewitching songs. So we see here a highly ethical significance to this encounter with the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. Because Beauty communicates the True and the Good through its radiance, the awakening of *eros* always involves the awakening of *arête*—the classical virtues (wisdom, moderation, justice, and courage)—which occurs when the *logos*, *thymos*, and *epithymetes* or *eros* constituting the tripartite human soul reflect the balance or harmony of the cosmos.²⁵ Thus Plato saw an inextricable link between virtue and a true knowledge of the world.

The important point here is that Beauty, because of its divine nature, is always linked with the True and the Good. In order for something to be truly beautiful, it must by definition draw one to the True and the Good.

23. Plato, *Symposium* 210e–211d, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).

24. Plato, *Republic* 328d; cf. *Laws* 854a; *Phaedrus* 83b.

25. Cf. *ibid.*, 442a.

ENCOUNTERING TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY THROUGH *PAIDEIA*

For Plato, the educational project of *paideia* involves teaching students to repudiate what deserves repudiation and to love what is in fact lovely and deserving of our desires.²⁶ This involves what amounts to be a three-stage process.

First, there is the need to realize there is in fact a problem, that one is in fact ignorant and incapable of accounting for reality. This admission of personal impoverishment, what the Greeks called *aporia* and the Latins called *pietas*, is the rationale for the Socratic Dialogue; Socrates was able to impart wisdom only when his interlocutor admits ignorance and perplexity.

Second, this intellectual and spiritual vacuousness, this virtue of humility, can then be *filled*—and filled not merely with facts but with a recollection of the knowledge of the world as it relates to that which is eternally True, Good, and Beautiful. This stage involves a twofold purification by which students cultivate a detachment from false things and an attachment to true things. The twofold purification consists of a *moral* and an *intellectual* purification. Moral purification involves the practice of the virtues, which in effect distances the soul from the confines and temptations of the body. Intellectual purification, or *theoria*, involves contemplation of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, particularly in mathematics, where students are able see the reality that lies beyond appearances. Thus, all subjects in an educational curriculum serve as lenses through which the True, the Good, and the Beautiful can be encountered. Gymnastics cultivate the virtue of *enkrateia* or self-mastery; music and poetry provide the chief means by which the rhythm and harmony of the cosmos can be communicated through the body and sunk deeply into the recesses of the soul.²⁷

26. Plato, *Laws*, ed. and trans. by R.G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 653b6–c4.

27. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 8.

Third, there is ultimate *theoria*, the union of the soul with the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, a beatific vision that one simply cannot experience while embodied. One experiences this vision only at death.²⁸

SUMMARY

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty emerge historically in a world very much removed from our own. This world was characterized by cosmic piety, the sense that the universe was alive with divine presence and thus obligated all people born into the world to live a particular kind of life, one that oriented the self into a harmonious relationship with the world and others. This obligation was lived out in the life of the *polis*, the city-state, which served as the civic center for communion between men and the gods. In order to foster a harmonious relationship with the cosmos and city, the Greek educational project called *paideia* sought to instill within students a love for the cosmic values: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. As particularly developed in the work of Plato, these values served as the harmonious model for cultivating a comparable harmony in one's own soul, which one then lived out in harmony with one's fellow man, and thus exemplified and perpetuated the cosmic harmony that sustained the world.

The educational project of paideia involves teaching students to repudiate what deserves repudiation and to love what is in fact lovely and deserving of our desires.

Plato's philosophy provides us with the cosmic, anthropological, and civic frames of reference for the emergence of a distinctly Christian development of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, and it is to this Christian reappropriation that we now turn.

28. Plato, *Phaedo*, ed. and trans. by Harold North Fowler, *Plato*, Vol. I, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 66c–67a.

CHAPTER THREE

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Christian World, Part I

The Greek East

INTRODUCTION

As we discovered in chapter 2, Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are part of a particular conception of the universe, one we called “cosmic piety,” in which the universe is considered to be filled with divine meaning and purpose, which obligates all people to live in a particular harmonious way toward the world and their fellow man. At the heart of this cosmic piety are the cosmic values of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty, which bring balance to the human soul and society alike.

In this chapter, I want to explore how the Christian reconceptualization of the cosmos involved a proportionate reappropriation of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. We will find that Christians do indeed tap into the cosmic, anthropological, and civic frames of reference characteristic of Plato and the classical world, all the while radically altering these frames of reference in ways that forge a vision of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty that is wholly unprecedented. I will begin with the New Testament witness of the re-creation of the world in Christ and then explore the implications of this Christ-centered cosmology for the development of distinctively Christian conceptions of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS

The prologue of the Gospel of John begins: “In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God.” The term *logos* represents one of the central concepts in classical Greek culture. *Logos* has the dual meaning of “counting” and “speaking,” and thus from its beginning it had the sense of a linguistic order or metrical word and was associated very much with verbally expressed ratio relations.¹ Starting with Heraclitus in the sixth century BC, the term increasingly began to be associated with the world as a grand rational and intelligible order, what the Greeks called *cosmos*. Many of us are familiar with the Latin-rooted term *quintessence*; in classical cosmology there were four essences—earth, air, fire, and water—and the *quintessence*, or what the Greeks called *logos*, was the cosmic principle in which the totality of the universe cohered.

As evidenced by the Gospel of John, Christians in the Greco-Roman world tap into this idea of an integrated cosmos while at the same radically modifying it. For example, like Heraclitus, Christians affirm a cosmically comprehensive *Logos* but take the unprecedented step of identifying that divine *Logos* as a divine Person who became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Further, Christians replace an eternal cosmos with creation *ex nihilo*, which in effect overturns the entire Greco-Roman metaphysical order. While the Greco-Roman creation myths were concerned with how the gods brought order out of chaos, the Christian creation account involves a *radical* creation of the cosmos; the Christian God created literally every square inch of the cosmos, such that the operating physics of the cosmos is not power over chaos but rather divine gratuity and love. Indeed, the translators of the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, anticipated this relationship between God’s spoken word, his *Logos*, and the nature of creation in its translation of the refrain “and God saw that it was good.” Rather than translate the Hebrew word *tob*, “good,” with the Greek equivalent, *agathos*, the translators chose

1. See Eva Brann, *The Logos of Heraclitus* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2011).

kallos, the Greek word for “beautiful,” which is then followed by the phrase “and God called” (*ekalesen*). And Christians link this created order both with a radical fall marked by sin and death and with a new creation that overcomes this sin and death, made a present reality in the unification of heaven and earth in the resurrected and glorified body of Christ.

The quintessence, or what the Greeks called logos, was the cosmic principle in which the totality of the universe cohered.

We can see from the earliest evidence available to us that the Incarnation was understood by Christians in distinctly cosmic terms. In addition to the prologue of John, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians describes God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ in what biblical scholar Greg Sterling calls prepositional metaphysics, in which the dynamics of the cosmos were described with terms like “from,” “in,” and “through.” Thus Paul said: “For us, there is one God the Father, *from* (*ek*) whom are all things and we *in* (*eis*) him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, *through* (*dia*) whom are all things and we *through* (*dia*) him” (1 Corinthians 8:6, author’s translation).² Similarly, in Colossians 1:15–20, Christ is depicted as the one through whom all things are created and in whom all things cohere. Indeed, in Christ, all things are made new (Revelation 21:5).

Furthermore, the Hebraic conception of creation upon which Christianity rests provides us with a fundamentally different conception of the human person than that of the Greeks. For Plato, there is a distinction between the spiritual world and the material world, the *eidon* and *eikon*, and the human soul belonged properly to the divine order, the *eidon*, the realm of the forms. The soul, being eternal, was in fact frustrated by its embodiment in the material order. With the advent of Christianity, both the cosmos and the human soul are radically rearranged: the human soul

2. See Gregory E. Sterling, “Prepositional Metaphysics in Jewish Wisdom Speculation and Early Christian Liturgical Texts,” *Studia Philonica Annual* 9 (1997): 219–238.

now belongs properly to the created order. It is no more divine than the creation, and thus there is no possibility of an eternally pre-existing soul. In the words of Andrew Louth: “The soul has nothing in common with God; there is no kinship between it and the divine. Its kinship is with its body, in virtue of their common creation, rather than with God.”³

With the advent of Christianity, both the cosmos and the human soul are radically rearranged: the human soul now belongs properly to the created order.

Instead, the human person is recast as created “in the image of God,” which is translated in the Septuagint as *kat’ eikona tou Theou*, “according to the image of God.” The preposition *kata* has the significance of “in accordance with,” and thus most early Greek fathers interpreted this phrase to mean that humans were created in accordance with the Logos, who is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), through whom all things were made. So for the Greek patristics our very creation entails a relationship not merely to God as creator but also to Christ as God Incarnate, the image of the invisible God.⁴

And this is why for the early Greek theologians the Incarnation is so important to the realization of our true humanity. When we were first created in Paradise, we were created to discern and delight in creation as a reflection of the *Logos* through whom all things were made, and hence we were able to understand ourselves as creatures created in that Image. But in the Fall, this vision is frustrated; it is marred by the tyranny of sin, death, and the devil. And so, the created order, the Paradise that was to serve as the habitat that shaped and sanctified the human person,

3. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 77.

4. Andrew Louth, “Later Theologians of the Greek East,” in Philip F. Esler, ed., *The Early Christian World*, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2000), 580-601.

has now been restored in the Incarnation of the *Logos*, the second person of the Trinity.⁵ Indeed, this is the classical significance of the Eucharistic meal, where the grain and fruit of the third day of creation are transformed into the bread and wine identified with the body and blood of Christ, such that creation and Incarnation come together to restore our communion with God and one another.

GREGORY OF NYSSA, INFINITY, AND *EPEKTASIS*

This recalibration of the cosmos around Christ the *Logos* had highly determinative implications for distinctly Christian conceptions of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Here I want to focus in on two representatives of the Eastern Christian tradition who were highly formative in the development of that tradition, starting with Gregory of Nyssa (ca. AD 335–394).

Gregory of Nyssa is credited with developing New Testament insights into a profoundly aesthetic vision of the relationship between God, creation, and the human person. He developed an unprecedented conception of divine “infinity” (*apeiria*) particularly as it relates to the Good. For Gregory, the goodness of God entails the fact that God has no limits, that He is absolute in His infinity:

The Good, as long as it is incapable of its opposite, has no bounds to its goodness. . . . Strength is topped only when weakness seizes it; life is limited by death alone; darkness is the ending of light. . . . But if the Divine and unalterable nature is incapable of degeneracy, as even our foes allow, we must regard it as absolutely unlimited in its goodness: and the unlimited is the same as the infinite.⁶

5. See, for example, Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, transl. Sister Penelope Lawson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002).

6. Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius” I.15, in *Dogmatic Treatises*, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, vol. 5, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

Because God is boundless, without limit, transcending any contrary or opposite, He is an “immense ocean” or sea of Being, beyond comparison, and thus “ineffable and incomprehensible.”⁷ And Gregory envisioned the infinite emanating or spilling out into the finite in aesthetic splendor through God’s act of creation, which manifests materially the glory of God through its participation in His divine Goodness and Beauty.

Epektasis involves . . . an intense desire or longing, an ardent love on the part of the human soul to be filled with the inexhaustible plenitude of God’s infinite Beauty.

For Gregory, what is so important here is that the created nature of material reality entails movement and directionality. The very fact that we as creatures have moved from nonbeing to being, from nonexistence to existence, means that the human person is always either drawn toward or away from God. As a creature, there is no such thing as being stagnant. We rise out of the dust moving toward God or away from God. It is in this drawing of the soul either toward or away from God that Gregory developed his distinctive aesthetic theology, for it is the mind’s perception of Beauty that serves as the gravitational pull one way or the other. According to Gregory: “there is always something towards which the will is tending, the appetency for moral Beauty naturally drawing it on to movement, this Beauty is in one instance really such in its nature, in another it is not so, only blossoming with an illusive appearance of Beauty; and the criterion of these two kinds is the mind that dwells within us.”⁸

Now, we saw something very similar to this in Plato. For Plato, true Beauty awakens *eros* or love or desire within the human person, which serves as the gravitational pull that draws us into an encounter with the

7. Ibid., II.3.

8. Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism” XXI, in *Dogmatic Treatises*, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, vol. 5, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004).

True and the Good. False Beauty awakens not love but lust, *epithymia*, within us and thus draws us away from the True and the Good. Beauty attracts, whereas lies seduce.

For Gregory, this divine gravitational pull is *epektasis*, which is based on Paul's usage of the verb *epekteinomai* ("extension" or "reaching") in Philippians 3:13.⁹ *Epektasis* involves for Gregory an intense desire or longing, an ardent love on the part of the human soul to be filled with the inexhaustible plenitude of God's infinite Beauty. This is what God uses to awaken a love within us and thus draw us up into a relationship with Himself. Gregory described this longing in his work *The Life of Moses*, which reimagines Moses's life as paradigmatic for a distinctly Christian conception of spiritual ascent:

Such an experience seems to me to belong to the soul which loves what is beautiful. Hope always draws the soul from the Beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived. Therefore, the ardent lover of Beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype. And the bold request which goes up the mountains of desire asks this: to enjoy the Beauty not in mirrors or reflections, but face to face.¹⁰

The key characteristic of this stretching out of the soul toward God is its eternal dynamic: given the Goodness of God in His infinity, there is no end in this longing, for no matter how much one is filled with divine Beauty, one longs for more. The eternal dynamic of *epektasis*, however, should not be confused with a frustrated soul, since the eternal longing for ever more divine glory is itself the fruit of the *satisfaction* that the soul experiences in its encounter with divine Beauty. As John Rist observes: "*Epektasis* is *eros* without frustration as the lover is more and more fully

9. The term "*epektasis*" was given to this motif in Gregory's thought by Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), 291–307.

10. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), II.231–232.

blended with the infinite.”¹¹ Or perhaps we might think of this as what Paul Blowers calls a “sublime frustration, an ongoing process of mystical union with God, with every spiritual advance being merely a new beginning in the never-ending mystery.”¹² This “sublime frustration” for Gregory is the love awakened within the soul by God’s Beauty. Gregory used both *eros* and *agape* “to describe this love, a love which is essentially a desire for union with the beloved.”¹³ Salvation is thus a reunification of the soul with the inner life of God, being drawn into the infinite plenitude of Trinitarian life through the physics of love awakened by divine Beauty.

Thus, while Gregory may sound like Plato, there is a radical difference in that Plato’s world of the forms cares nothing about us; it does not seek after us and certainly does not die for us. Hence, for Gregory, this *epektasis*, this eternal traversing of God’s infinity, involves an eternal communion with the God revealed in Christ, who is the self-replenishing fountain of love and delight, an infinite sea of absolute Beauty.¹⁴

DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE AND THE DIVINE NAMES

Gregory’s vision of the eternal ascent of the soul into the infinite Goodness and Beauty that is the inner life of God was developed further by a writer from the beginning of the sixth century known to us only under the pseudonym Dionysius the Areopagite. The name originates in the New Testament, where in Acts 17:34 one named Dionysius of the Areopagus is reported to have been converted by Paul

11. John Rist, “On the Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa,” *Hermathena* 169 (Winter 2000): 145.

12. Paul M. Blowers, “Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of ‘Perpetual Progress,’” *Vigiliae Christianae* 46, no. 2 (June 1992): 151.

13. Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 96.

14. For a masterful exposition of these themes in Gregory’s writings, see David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003).

by his apologetic for the Christian faith delivered on Mars Hill. For whatever reason, several centuries later, a Christian writer (perhaps a monk) wrote under this name a number of works that became perhaps the most influential writings in Byzantine theology and, as we shall see, made a significant contribution to the development of Latin scholasticism, particularly in the work of Thomas Aquinas.¹⁵

Dionysius drew together Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in a unique cosmic vision where the whole of the created order is envisioned as continuously praising God through the divinely revealed names of God. The revelation of God's names discloses His character and His glory, His attributes that are otherwise beyond the comprehension of finite creatures. It is through the contemplation of the divine names that the human soul is drawn up into a union with God through a sequential process of purification, illumination, and perfection or union (*katharsis*, *photismos*, *teleiosis* or *henosis*).¹⁶

Dionysius draws together Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in a unique cosmic vision where the whole of the created order is envisioned as continuously praising God through the divinely revealed names of God.

For Dionysius, the first of God's names is the "Good," "which the sacred writers have preeminently set apart for the supra-divine God from all other names."¹⁷ Dionysius followed Plato in positing a priority of the Good over Being, which he illustrated with the Platonic example of the Good being likened to the sun:

15. See Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 1–2.

16. Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 163.

17. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), IV.1: 693B. Hereafter I will refer to *The Divine Names* simply as *DN*.

Think of how it is with our sun . . . by the very fact of its existence it gives light to whatever is able to partake of its light, in its own way. So it is with the Good. Existing far above the sun, an archetype far superior to its dull image, it sends the rays of its undivided goodness to everything with the capacity, such as this may be, to receive it. These rays are responsible for all intelligible and intelligent beings, for every power and every activity. . . . They abide in the goodness of God and draw from it the foundation of what they are, their coherence, their vigilance, their home. Their longing for the Good makes them what they are and confers on them their well-being.¹⁸

As all things participate in the Good, they comprise a hierarchical chain of being, a cosmic order, in which they all interconnect through their mutual relatedness.¹⁹ All things in the created order are good only insofar as they participate in and reflect their proportion and order assigned by the Good. Thus the Areopagite wrote: “The Good returns all things to itself and gathers together whatever may be scattered, for it is the divine Source and unifier of the sum total of all things. Each being looks to it as a source, as the agent of cohesion, and as an objective.”²⁰ Dionysius’s universe has thus been likened to “a cascade of beauties springing forth from the First Principle, a dazzling radiance of sensuous splendours which diversify in all created being.”²¹ It is the divine Good that accounts for the integrity, form, and order inherent in the cosmos.

All things in the created order are good only insofar as they participate in and reflect their proportion and order assigned by the Good.

18. *DN*IV.1: 696A.

19. *DN*IV.2: 696B.

20. *DN*IV.4: 700A.

21. Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 23.

But what holds this cosmic order in place? How do all things rightly participate in the Good and hence manifest their mutuality and interrelatedness? Dionysius identified the Beautiful as that divine attribute that draws all things into the Good. Following Plato, Dionysius noted the etymological connection between *kallos* (Beauty) and *kalein* (to call): “Beauty ‘bids’ all things to itself (whence it is called ‘Beauty’) and gathers everything into itself.”²² Like the Good, Beauty confers beauty on all finite, contingent things in a hierarchical fashion that by its nature directs and draws all things toward their beautifying source. The divine Beauty is therefore

the beautiful beyond all. It is forever so, unvaryingly, unchangeably so, beautiful but not as something coming to birth and death, to growth or decay, not lovely in one respect while ugly in some other way. It is not beautiful “now” but otherwise “then,” beautiful in relation to one thing but not to another. It is not beautiful in one place and not so in another, as though it could be beautiful for some and not for others. Ah no! In itself and by itself it is the uniquely and the eternally beautiful. It is the superabundant source in itself of the Beauty of every beautiful thing. In that simple but transcendent nature of all beautiful things, Beauty and the beautiful uniquely preexisted in terms of their source. From this Beauty comes the existence of everything, each being exhibiting its own way of Beauty. For Beauty is the cause of harmony, of sympathy, of community. Beauty unites all things and is the source of all things. It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have Beauty. And there it is ahead of all as Goal, as the Beloved, as the Cause toward which all things move, since it is the longing for Beauty which actually brings them into being.²³

We may note here the threefold simultaneity between the Beautiful and the Good, for like the Good, the Beautiful is the cause of all things,

22. *DNIV.7: 701D*; see Plato, *Cratylus, Parmenides, Greater Hippias, Lesser Hippias*, ed. and trans. by Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 416c.

23. *DN IV.7: 701D–704A*.

the goal in the consummation of all things, and the agent through which all things reach their goal. By contemplating all things in the created order as they participate in God's Goodness and Beauty, the human soul is awakened to the inner life of God and thereby realizes its own purpose and goal. Thus Dionysius concluded:

To put the matter briefly, all being derives from, exists in, and is returned toward the Beautiful and the Good. Whatever there is, whatever comes to be, is there and has being on account of the Beautiful and the Good. All things look at it. All things are moved by it. All things are preserved by it. Every source exists for the sake of it, because of it, and in it and this is so whether such source be exemplary, final, efficient, formal, or elemental. In short, every source, all preservation and ending, everything in fact, derives from the Beautiful and the Good.²⁴

Along with his conception of the Beautiful and the Good, Dionysius elucidated a uniquely paradoxical conception of Truth. Dionysius observed that every statement about God postulated by limited, finite creatures such as ourselves entails limitations concomitant with our finiteness and thus falls short of expressing the true nature of God. God is not Himself an object in this world and thus cannot be known; but God has indeed revealed Himself in this world, and the extent of this self-disclosure is the extent of our true knowledge of Him. Dionysius introduced into the Christian lexicon a Neo-Platonic term, "*apophatic* theology," a theology of negation, connoting the idea that what is affirmed by God through His revelation to us (what Dionysius would refer to as "*kataphatic* theology") does not exhaust His own self-disclosure. This means that all our affirmations of God entail a concomitant denial of what we are affirming. God is most certainly love (1 John 4:8) and yet, because of His infinite nature (note the negation of "finite"), His love is in fact incomprehensible and unsearchable (Romans 11:33). Thus, far from negating any attributes of God, apophatic theology *affirms* that God transcends all human categories

24. DN IV.10: 705D.

and language.²⁵ God is invisible, indescribable, ineffable, infinite, boundless, uncontainable, and incomprehensible. Notice that all these terms are terms of negation; we affirm who God is by saying what He is not. Thus, we may affirm God to be Beautiful as He has disclosed Himself to us through creation and Incarnation, Word and sacrament, but in doing so we must recognize that God's Beauty is itself incomprehensible and ineffable, and thus extends beyond all human description.

For Dionysius, communion with this infinite plenitude of Being is the goal and purpose, indeed the destiny, of all creation. For the divine names of the Good, the Beautiful, and the True extend universally into all things as divine Love, which Dionysius understood to be "a capacity to effect a unity, an alliance, and a particular commingling in the Beautiful and the Good."²⁶ And it is this Love that serves as a cosmic "yearning," a divine physics that draws together God, the human soul, and the whole of creation into a rapturous union with the Good and the Beautiful:

This divine yearning brings ecstasy so that the lover belongs not to self but to the beloved. . . . This is why the great Paul, swept along by his yearning for God and seized of its ecstatic power, had this inspired word to say: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Paul was truly a lover and, as, he says, he was beside himself for God, possessing not his own life but the life of the One for whom he yearned, as exceptionally beloved. And in truth, it must be said too that the very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good superabundance of his benign yearning for all is also carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself. . . . In this way he proves himself to be zealous

25. Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 87–88.

26. *DN* IV.12: 709C.

because zeal is always felt for what is desired, and because he is zealous for the creatures for whom he provides. In short, both the yearning and the object of that yearning belong to the Beautiful and the Good. They preexist in it, and because of it they exist and come to be.²⁷

The cosmos is thus a glorious manifestation of Divine Love, a beatific union of God and His creation, consummated in an eternal symphony of divine praise. It is this Love that awakens a comparable love within us, which serves to draw us ardently into the inner life of God, and thus restores us back to Paradise.

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SUMMARY

We have thus far seen that Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Christian tradition of the Greek East are rooted in a highly unique conception of God, the cosmos, and the human person. The cosmos is in fact filled with divine meaning and purpose, threatened by the Fall and restored in the Incarnation, which in turn evokes quite purposefully a particular kind of piety within the human person. The human person is created in the image of God in order to respond to the diaphanous cosmos that reveals God's Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Having been frustrated by the Fall, the cosmos is now redeemed in Christ, who evokes an ardent desire—a love—for God in the human person, who is drawn back into fellowship with God through contemplating the divine attributes of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful in anticipation of the consummation of all things, when heaven and earth are forever one.

27. DN IV.13: 712A–B.