

When Jesus lost his soul: fourth-century christology and modern neuroscience

Mark Harris

University of Edinburgh, New College, Mound Place, Edinburgh EH1 2LX, UK

Mark.Harris@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Modern conversations between the natural sciences and theology on the human soul have not so far engaged extensively with relevant debates in the early church. Contemporary neuroscience tends to operate within a monistic paradigm, often referred to as ‘physicalism’, that understands human mental activity entirely in naturalistic terms. While there is ongoing scientific debate about the degree to which human consciousness can be reduced entirely to biology, physicalism is often cited as making traditional religious belief in the soul obsolete, or at least modifying it significantly. The Apollinarian question of whether Jesus has a soul therefore reappears. This article considers the contemporary relevance of the Apollinarian controversy, suggesting that fourth-century insights possess key points of contact with the modern non-reductive physicalist position and thus raising important considerations for the science–theology conversation on the soul.

Keywords: Apollinarianism, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, soul, non-reductive physicalism, theological anthropology

Introduction

Belief in the soul, understood as an immaterial entity that encapsulates a person’s living identity and carries on into the afterlife, has been an important component of Western Christian anthropologies for many centuries. Recent decades have seen something of a paradigm shift, however, on account of the emerging monistic consensus in neuroscientific research and in cognitive science, based on the conviction that all mental and spiritual capacities are located in neural activity.¹ The inevitable effect has been to cast doubt on the existence of the immaterial soul. And although some philosophers

¹ It is not that such work altogether disproves soul–body (or mind–body) dualism, but rather that, as Nancey Murphy contends, the current monistic approach should be regarded as the hard core of a Lakatosian ‘research program’, which has been far more productive in scientific terms than has the contending hard core of mind–body dualism. Nancey Murphy, ‘The Resurrection Body and Personal Identity: Possibilities and Limits of Eschatological Knowledge’, in Ted Peters, Robert John Russell and Michael Welker

and theologians have defended dualistic accounts, others have responded positively to the monistic paradigm by putting forward anthropologies which emphasise the essential physical unity of the human person, and which see mental and spiritual capacities (including the soul) as entirely emergent therefrom. A particularly influential example of the latter is ‘non-reductive physicalism’, set out by the essays in Warren Brown et al.’s well-known collection, *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* Less a detailed engagement with the specifics of the science, and more an account of the paradigm shift away from Cartesian substance dualism towards monism, this contemporary move can be seen as a rediscovery of the more holistic anthropology of ancient Hebrew thought, an anthropology which had disappeared from view in medieval Western Christianity through the influence of Greek dualistic tendencies.

In this article, I will argue that this perceived historical trajectory is oversimplified and ignores key christological debates of the early church, where these very problems concerning the soul were discussed extensively. The fourth century CE is important in this, especially the theological crisis in the Greek-speaking East precipitated by Apollinarius of Laodicea’s teaching that Christ does not have a rational human mind/soul (νοῦς). This crisis led to a careful consideration of the merits of monist, dualist and trichotomist anthropologies, especially by the two Cappadocian theologians, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, revealing soteriological points that have not yet been considered in depth in the contemporary soul debate. This article will present the relevant fourth-century views critically, suggesting that they are compatible with the modern physicalist position on the soul, but that this position needs to be expanded to incorporate three theological features: (1) the place of sin; (2) the soul as causal joint (or ‘dividing wall’); and (3) the Cappadocian theology of θέωσις/ἐπέκτασις.

The historical trajectory

Any contemporary discussion of the soul must reckon with a formidable background in the history of thought. Modern studies often describe this history in terms of a trajectory through key thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition, beginning at Plato and Aristotle, proceeding quickly through Augustine and Aquinas, and then pausing at Descartes as the most important forebear of contemporary substance dualism.² This trajectory

(eds), *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 202–18.

² E.g., Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp. 11–16, 45–7; Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *A Brief History of the Soul* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 6–104.

construes the soul debate in terms of evolving views on substance and form, not least because the Cartesian question (of whether the reality of the thinking world is to be seen as wholly distinct from the reality of the material world) tends to revolve on whether the soul should be seen as a separate substance from the material world, or as a form within (or tied to) that world (hylomorphism). Thus, more dualistic approaches are contrasted with more monistic, Plato with Aristotle, and Augustine with Aquinas.

The biblical world, knowing little or nothing of Greek philosophical categories, represents something of an outlier in this trajectory, but the Bible can be incorporated as a representative of the hard monistic end of the spectrum,³ since the ancient Semitic view of the human person maintained an essential physical unity.⁴ Thus, talk of the ‘soul’ in the biblical context is a way of summing up this unity as imbued with God-breathed life (Gen 2:7). Likewise, whatever Paul meant by his term ‘spiritual body’ when discussing the afterlife (1 Cor 15:44), he was almost certainly thinking in terms of the resurrection of a material body rather than the post-mortem existence of a disembodied soul.

Significantly, the idea that the soul is detachable – an intangible entity in its own right which contains a person’s true identity beyond their bodily death – appears clearly in early Christianity in the thought of theologians such as Origen and Augustine, who were heavily influenced by their Hellenistic context.⁵ This importation of the immortal and dualistic soul into Christianity is of dubious merit, according to some. Pannenberg, for instance, is particularly negative, explaining how, despite the best efforts of early theologians to maintain a holistic view, the Hellenistic body–soul duality ‘invaded Christian anthropology’ in the second century.⁶ The implication is that much could be gained by rediscovering the earlier Christian view, and Nancey Murphy wonders wistfully what might have happened if the importation of dualism had been resisted, averring that Christianity would almost certainly have retained a ‘broader, richer’ emphasis on the this-worldly teachings of Jesus rather than on metaphysical speculations.⁷

³ E.g., Joel B. Green, “‘Bodies – that is, Human Lives’: A Re-Examination of Human Nature in the Bible”, in Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy and H. Newton Malony (eds), *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), pp. 149–73, see pp.172–3 especially; Goetz and Taliaferro, *Brief History*, p. 30.

⁴ Nancey Murphy, ‘Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues’, in Brown et al., *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, pp. 1–29, see pp.19–24 especially.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p. 182.

⁷ Murphy, *Bodies and Souls*, pp. 27–8.

I myself would tend to agree: there is something to be said for the contemporary reassertion of monistic anthropologies over the long-prevalent dualistic views, if the former allow for a renewed appreciation of biblical texts, and for a constructive engagement of theology with modern neuroscience, which is, after all, resolutely monistic in its view of human mental processes.⁸ However, insofar as this contemporary theological reassertion of anthropological monism is served by an historical trajectory which sees the varying views on substance and form as the only issues of note, it has meant that other theological questions concerning the soul have received little or no attention. That there are indeed such other questions becomes clear when the ‘invasion’ of the Hellenistic soul in the early church is examined, especially around the controversial teachings of Apollinarius, who became bishop of Laodicea around 360. Not only does this controversy demonstrate that belief in the soul was complex and varied in the early church, but it also suggests that issues of substance and form are of rather secondary theological importance.

The Apollinarian Christ

Apollinarius formulated his infamous Christology as an attempt to underscore the full divinity of the Son of God against the Arians,⁹ and to clinch the argument by explaining how the divine Son could coexist with the human Jesus to make the one Christ.¹⁰ Crucially, Apollinarius achieved this holistic anthropology by denying the soul – rather as in the contemporary reassertion of anthropological monism. As Apollinarius saw it, the incarnation is literally the enfleshment of the divine Logos.¹¹ Since Stoic thought connected the Logos with the universal animating wisdom, and biblical texts (John 1:1–18) identified the Logos with the divine itself,

⁸ Although ‘physicalist’ tends to be the adjective of choice over ‘monistic’.

⁹ See, e.g., Kelly McCarthy Spoerl, ‘Apollinarius and the Response to Early Arian Christology’, *Studia Patristica* 26 (1993), pp. 421–7; although she later suggests that Apollinarius had other non-Arian antagonists in his sights, such as Marcellus of Ancyra. Kelly McCarthy Spoerl, ‘Apollinarian Christology and the Anti-Marcellan Tradition’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994), pp. 545–68.

¹⁰ Ironically, Apollinarius’ solution was really to state in clearer terms the logic which Athanasius and others seem to have been moving towards, namely that the incarnation was possible because the divine Son operated as the soul of Christ. See Brian Daley, ‘“Heavenly Man” and “Eternal Christ”: Apollinarius and Gregory of Nyssa on the Personal Identity of the Savior’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002), pp. 469–88, see especially p. 475.

¹¹ Apollinarius’ solution, which made the holistic unity of Christ a key selling point, bequeathed the famous phrase to the later Nestorian controversy: ‘one enfleshed Word of God’.

it is easy to see the logic by which Apollinarius identified the Logos with the mind of Christ, empowering the human body of Jesus in place of the usual rational human soul.

Two particular concerns appear to stand behind Apollinarius' denial of a human soul for Jesus. First, there is the need to understand Christ in unified terms: to be able to affirm unambiguously that Christ the Saviour, God and human, is one, and is therefore able to unite humans with God.¹² Second, there is the problem of sin: Apollinarius was certain that Christ cannot save humankind if Christ is in possession of a human mind or soul, because he (Christ) would then be influenced by sin. Only a Christ who does not possess a fallible human soul or mind has the power to save. As Apollinarius writes, 'The Word did not become flesh by taking on a human mind, a mind that is changeable and subject to filthy thoughts, but by being a divine unchangeable heavenly mind.'¹³ Similarly, he notes in one of the fragments of his *Apodeixis*: 'If together with God, who is intellect (νοῦς), there was also a human intellect (ἀνθρώπινος νοῦς) in Christ, then the work of the incarnation is not accomplished in him.'¹⁴ According to Apollinarius then, Christ needs the divine mind in order to be the Saviour because otherwise he would not be immune from sin.

It is difficult to pin down Apollinarius' argument with confidence though, not least because of the fragmentary form in which his texts have come down to us. In some of his fragments he seems to operate with a basic dichotomist anthropology: the human person is flesh (σάρξ) and spirit (πνεῦμα), with the Logos taking the place of spirit in Christ (i.e. 'spirit' is all that is non-material in the human and thus includes soul, mind and spirit); while in other writings Apollinarius works with a trichotomist anthropology: body (σῶμα), animal soul (ψυχή) and rational mind (νοῦς), where the Logos takes the place of νοῦς in Christ.¹⁵ It is unclear why

¹² Frances M. Young with Andrew Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (London: SCM, 2010), p. 251.

¹³ This passage is taken from Apollinarius' ΠΡΟΣ ΤΟΥΣ ΕΝ ΔΙΟΚΑΙΣΑΡΕΙΑ ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΥΣ 2.256.5-7, in the Greek text provided by Hans Lietzmann, *Apollinaris von Laodicea und seine Schule* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1904), pp. 255–6. I have used the translation in Kelley McCarthy Spoerl, 'The Liturgical Argument in Apollinarius: Help and Hindrance on the Way to Orthodoxy', *Harvard Theological Review* 91 (1998), pp. 127–52, see p.144, n.50 especially.

¹⁴ Apollinarius, Fragment 74; Greek text is 2.222 in Lietzmann, *Apollinaris von Laodicea*; translation from Richard A. Norris, *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), p. 109.

¹⁵ Young with Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, p. 249; an exhaustive account is given by Timothy John Carter, *The Apollinarian Christologies: A Study of the Writings of Apollinarius of Laodicea* (London: Hamley King, 2011).

Apollinarius' anthropology is inconsistent in this way: it might be context dependent,¹⁶ or it is possible that his anthropology evolved over time,¹⁷ as he sought to nuance it more carefully in soteriological terms.¹⁸ But throughout, Apollinarius' main point seems to be that in Christ it is the divine mind (the Logos) that is dominant, providing supernatural life and motivation to the human flesh.¹⁹ This allows Apollinarius to develop an ethical/subjective soteriology in the trichotomist fragments, whereby ordinary humans are saved by making their own intellectual 'self-assimilation' (οἰκεῖω) of Christ's divine-human union.²⁰ The human mind is usually subject not only to sin, but also to the sinful flesh, which tends to dominate; the human mind literally cannot help itself of itself.²¹ But if ordinary Christians submit to Christ intellectually, with his all-powerful divine mind ruling the flesh, then they can appropriate/assimilate his divine mind for themselves, argues Apollinarius.²² This appropriation takes place through a kind of self-willed and subjective imitation of Christ,²³ where the power of the mind is exerted over the flesh in order to attain Christ's virtue.²⁴ Like Apollinarius' christology, therefore, his soteriology places a heavy emphasis on mind and cognition.

¹⁶ Young with Teal, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*, pp. 251–2.

¹⁷ As Carter argues throughout *The Apollinarian Christologies*.

¹⁸ Of course, it is also possible that Apollinarius really was inconsistent, a charge levelled at him by his critics (e.g. Gregory of Nyssa, who accuses Apollinarius of inconsistency throughout his own *Antirrhethikos*).

¹⁹ In Carter's invaluable analysis of the Apollinarian fragments, he explains how Apollinarius does not explore soteriological arguments in his dichotomist texts very thoroughly, but the soteriology he does offer there seems to be based on the idea that the union of divine and human in Christ offers a model (an example?) of 'physical at-one-ment' for ordinary humans, conferred symbolically through participation in the eucharist (Carter, *The Apollinarian Christologies*, pp. 160, 173). The trichotomist texts, on the other hand, offer a more sophisticated intellectual soteriology in Carter's reading (pp. 159–75), as I explain shortly.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 162, 173–5.

²¹ Apollinarius, Fragment 76. 'What was needed was unchangeable Intellect which did not fall under the domination of the flesh on account of its weakness of understanding but which adapted the flesh to itself without force'; translation from Norris, *The Christological Controversy*, p. 109.

²² Apollinarius, Fragment 74. 'The self-moved intellect within us shares in the destruction of sin insofar as it assimilates itself to Christ'; translation from Norris, *The Christological Controversy*, p. 109.

²³ Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 289.

²⁴ Apollinarius, Fragment 80. 'He [God/mind] gives a share in pure virtue to every mind under his control and to all those who become like Christ intellectually'; translation from Carter, *The Apollinarian Christologies*, p. 372.

The Cappadocian response

There are those today who warm to Apollinarius' innovations,²⁵ but the church of the time judged them to be dangerous failures.²⁶ In this, two of the Cappadocian theologians, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa, played crucial roles. Both were insistent that Christ must have a human soul/mind like us in order to save us. Gregory of Nazianzus' famous maxim says it all: 'That which is not assumed is not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved.'²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa made a similar point: 'That which he [Christ] united he assumed into his divinity.'²⁸ In other words, if the Logos had not assumed a human soul as well as a human body at the incarnation, then our human souls (minds) could not be said to be healed as well as our human bodies: Christ must assume the human condition entirely in order for it to be healed entirely. The Apollinarian Christ is therefore lacking in more than just a human soul: he is lacking in the ability to save humankind, according to the Cappadocian way of thinking.

Although a rhetorically effective critique, it is arguable whether this truly engages with the force of Apollinarius' position.²⁹ Still, the Cappadocian position does allow for the development of a more sophisticated soteriology. As Brian Daley puts it:

[The Gregorys'] real objection to Apollinarius' portrait of Christ is not simply the absence there of a human soul; it is, rather, his failure to see in Christ the source and type of God's project of reshaping all of humanity together, and every person individually in God's image, through the inner communication of divine life to a complete and normal human being.³⁰

²⁵ E.g. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 608–9.

²⁶ Apollinarius' doctrines were condemned at several councils, notably in Rome in 377 and Constantinople in 381. See J. F. Bethune-Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine* (London: Methuen, 1938), p. 240; and Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Change? The Word's Becoming in the Incarnation* (Still River: St Bede's, 1985), p. 27.

²⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, 'To Cledonius the Priest against Apollinarius' (Epistle CI), in Cyril of Jerusalem, *Gregory of Nazianzen*, vol. 7 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 440. Usually cited as Gregory's definitive answer to the Apollinarian controversy, this maxim had served well in previous controversies too. See Basil Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 195.

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Antirrhethikos*, M1252.

²⁹ For Apollinarius, it is important that Christ does not share our lowly humanity but is beyond us, so that we can be taken beyond ourselves; for the Gregorys on the other hand, Christ's humanity must be the same as ours, in order to heal what we are now.

³⁰ Daley, "'Heavenly Man' and 'Eternal Christ'", p. 478.

Therefore, according to the Gregorians, the work of salvation is *through* our humble and lowly humanity, in all its particularities and messiness, not around it or in spite of it, as Apollinarius had proposed. This Cappadocian emphasis leads to a powerfully holistic view of salvation, *including the soul*, although each Gregory developed this view differently, as I shall explain shortly.

But first it is important to expand upon the perceived failure of Apollinarius' soteriology, since it is relevant for the contemporary debate on the soul. The connection between sin and the soul is rarely discussed in the contemporary soul debate, but from a theological perspective it is vital to preserve this connection. In short, wherever anthropologically we place the soul/mind, we must also find a place for sin. Apollinarius failed, according to the Cappadocians, because the possibility of sin was not essential to his anthropology. Apollinarius' soul-less Christ was a being who was more-than-human but was actually less-than-human in anthropological terms: he had no means of experiencing sin, nor even of comprehending it fully in a truly 'human' way. Ordinary Christians might have been able to apprehend the mind of Christ intellectually in Apollinarius' soteriology, but since the mind of Christ itself was unable to apprehend sin at first hand, it was unclear that Christ could apprehend ordinary humans, still less help them.

My own concern to clarify this soteriological point arises because the modern debate on the soul has overlooked it so comprehensively. As I believe the Apollinarian controversy demonstrates, any theological anthropology must find an effective means of incorporating the full breadth of the human condition, especially of sin. Discussions of substance and form might be philosophically satisfying but they are theologically insufficient: if the human condition needs saving, then we must be clear what it needs saving from. Sin is, of course, as elusive a concept to describe as the soul: not simply wrong-doing (however that might be defined), the idea of sin in Jewish and Christian traditions encapsulates a formidable array of created and cosmic entities and circumstances standing over and against God. If it is unclear how best to reduce the idea of the soul/mind to a physicalist description without making it vanish altogether, then it is doubly unclear how to reduce the idea of sin to a physicalist description, even though *sin is still no less real as an experiential concept in the human condition*. In our concern to put forward a physicalist/monist description of the human condition, we might deny the immaterial soul, but we are still left with the problem of sin. I am not, however, advocating a return to a dualist anthropology. There are greater subtleties here than the question of dualism versus monism, as a close examination of what the two Gregorians believed about the soul begins to reveal.

The soul in Gregory of Nazianzus

In a highly significant passage, Gregory of Nazianzus draws further attention to the problem of sin in the soul debate, again attacking the Apollinarian doctrine of a soul-less Christ:

If . . . [Christ] assumed a body (σῶμα) but left out the mind (νοῦς), then there is an excuse for them who sin with the mind (νοῦς); for the witness of God – according to you – has shown the impossibility of healing it . . . therefore you take away the wall of partition (καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἐξαιρεῖς τὸ μεσότοιχον).³¹

The human soul/mind is by no means dispensable in Christ according to Gregory, since it forms the ‘wall of partition’ between the flesh and the Logos: it is the place where sin, conscience and what we would call consciousness are to be located in the human condition. Removing this ‘wall of partition’ (the human mind/soul) removes the possibility of both sin and conscience. Note that the Greek term translated here as ‘wall of partition’ (μεσότοιχον) is unusual, but it is particularly meaningful in this context: occurring in just one place in the New Testament, it is nevertheless prominent, and is richly suggestive for Gregory’s purposes: ‘For he [Christ] is our peace; he has made both groups one and has torn down the dividing wall of partition (τὸ μεσότοιχον τοῦ φραγμοῦ), that is, the enmity (τὴν ἔχθραν), in his flesh’ (ἐν τῇ σαρκὶ αὐτοῦ); Eph 2:14.³² Gregory’s image of the removal of the μεσότοιχον is a clear allusion to this biblical passage. Note that the intriguing combination of τὸ μεσότοιχον with τοῦ φραγμοῦ in the Ephesians text is both difficult to translate and difficult to interpret, but it conjures up the sense of a permanent and impassable barrier, which is nevertheless torn down by Christ.³³ And herein lies the real point of interest in the comparison between Gregory’s letter and the Ephesians text, for in

³¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, ‘To Cledonius’, p. 441 (cf. PG 37:188).

³² This is my own translation, which renders the Greek rather literally in order to expose the ambiguity of the final phrase. Muddiman, for instance, discusses four possible interpretative/translational options: John Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York, London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 130–2. For our purposes two stand out: should the final phrase be translated ‘in his flesh’, placing the enmity (the dividing wall) within the person of Christ himself, or is it better translated as ‘by means of his flesh’, referring to Christ’s act of atonement on the cross? The fact that in the Ephesians text the dividing wall and ‘the enmity’ refer to racial distinctions between Jews and Gentiles suggests that the latter option is preferable, but in the context of Gregory’s anthropological discussion of the soul of Christ as the dividing wall, the former option might be preferable.

³³ Muddiman, *Ephesians*, pp. 127–9.

the latter it is Christ who attacks the wall of partition, while in the former it is the Apollinarian, who does not tear down the wall of partition but makes it vanish altogether. In other words, the Apollinarian is an anti-Christ, eradicating the dividing wall of partition (the soul/mind), so that Christ no longer has anything to tear down, and therefore has no capacity to deal with sin (i.e. Christ has no atoning power). Another way of looking at this is to say that the wall of partition is the 'causal joint' across which divine action occurs; without it there is no possibility of atonement. This is why Gregory says that Apollinarianism provides an 'excuse' for those who sin with the mind: such sin cannot be atoned for in this system, but becomes an inevitable and fixed 'given' in human nature.

Gregory's argument then is that the human soul/mind should not be done away with: it is the locus of both sin and salvation, the battleground on which salvation is to be either won or lost. Therefore, the soul cannot be removed without making Christ (and the reality of sin) pointless. Gregory's next piece of correspondence makes the same challenge: 'They [the Apollinarians] who take away the Humanity and the Interior Image [the soul of Christ] cleanse by their newly invented mask only our outside, and that which is seen' (Οἱ τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἀποσκευαζόμενοι, καὶ τὴν ἐντὸς εἰκόνα, τὸ ἐκτὸς ἡμῶν καθαρίζουσι μόνον διὰ τοῦ καινοῦ προσώπειου, καὶ τοῦ ὀρωμένου).³⁴ This passage poses an important question for those in the contemporary soul debate (such as myself) who support a physicalist/monist thesis: by reducing the mind/soul to the status of flesh in Christian anthropology, does the physicalist approach reduce the human condition merely to 'that which is seen', therefore only allowing for a superficial cleansing of the human person, or is the physicalist approach capable of describing the true cleansing of the human 'interior', most especially the mysterious human consciousness? It would seem that, until the contemporary physicalist position develops an account of sin, this question will remain open.

Also relevant in Gregory's soteriology is his famous concept of *θέωσις*,³⁵ which offers a vision of how the Christian is turned, through the saving work of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, into the likeness of Christ. This occurs by means of a dynamic movement of growth towards God, which occurs at least in part in the believer's intellectual/epistemic domain of being.³⁶ As Christopher Beeley has pointed out, Gregory takes a very high view of doctrinal theology, seeing it as the primary means by which the

³⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, 'Against Apollinarius: The Second Letter to Cledonius' (Ep. CII); in Cyril of Jerusalem, *Gregory of Nazianzen*, p. 444 (cf. PG 37:197).

³⁵ Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity*, p. 117.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

Christian makes her ascent to God.³⁷ Contemplation of the mysteries of God, of Christ, and of salvation is what enables the upward journey. And although this is not so dissimilar to Apollinarius' suggestion that the Christian believer can assimilate herself to the mind of Christ, yet Christian tradition has judged Gregory's solution to be more successful, because Gregory's Christ, unlike Apollinarius', has actually taken the human mind to himself and healed it, not rejected it as unfit for purpose. In other words, Gregory's *θέωσις* offers a positive intellectual path towards healing and holiness of the entire human.

The soul in Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa developed a related idea of salvation to Gregory of Nazianzus' *θέωσις*, but known as *ἐπέκτασις*.³⁸ Similarly transformative through growth, *ἐπέκτασις* is potentially even more promising for the modern soul debate (as I will suggest shortly). Like Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa was certain that Christ has a human soul,³⁹ and he wrote a major (and largely non-polemical) treatise on the subject of the human soul and the afterlife, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.⁴⁰ This work is extremely useful in exploring fourth-century beliefs regarding the soul, and it demonstrates considerable sophistication in those beliefs, which are relevant to the monism/dualism question at the heart of the modern soul debate.

On the Soul and the Resurrection is constructed as a kind of Socratic dialogue between Gregory and his sister Macrina, who, through extended answers to Gregory's questions and doubts, provides much of the wisdom and direction of the piece.⁴¹ We know that the soul exists, Gregory tells us (via Macrina),

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 148–50.

³⁸ Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp. 127–8.

³⁹ In Gregory of Nyssa's major polemical work against Apollinarius, *Against Apollinarius* (or *Antirrhētikos*) possibly written mid-380s (see Brian E. Daley, 'Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa's Anti-Apollinarian Christology', *Studia Patristica* 32 (1997), pp. 87–95, see especially p. 90), Gregory expresses frequent exasperation that Apollinarius could effectively conceive of Jesus as a monstrous 'beast' without the single decisive element that would make him human, a rational soul.

⁴⁰ This was written around 380 as the Apollinarian controversy was resolving itself. Also of note is *On the Making of Humankind*, written perhaps shortly after the *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. See Michel René Barnes, 'Divine Unity and the Divided Self: Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology in its Psychological Context', in Sarah Coakley (ed.), *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 45–66, see pp. 48 and 50 especially.

⁴¹ Wessel argues that Gregory deliberately alludes to the model of Socrates' deathbed dialogue in Plato's *Phaedo*, in order to present a Christian subversion. Susan Wessel,

because we know that God exists.⁴² (S)he explains that our bodily senses, like sight, are able to apprehend the ‘almighty wisdom which is visible in the universe’ and thereby to know the existence of God. Gregory/Macrina then puts an interesting spin on this otherwise familiar argument from design by extending it to the soul and the body. Since the human being is ‘a little world’ in him/herself, when we look to our ‘inner world’ by means of ‘thought and not of sight’, we find evidence of what is unknown there, i.e. the soul, which (like God) ‘eludes the grasp of sense’. This is clearly a circular argument on Gregory/Macrina’s part – we may only apprehend the soul by our own rationality (i.e. through the exercise of our rational souls) – but the fact of the argument does at least demonstrate that the existence of the soul was by no means taken for granted, even in the fourth century.

Likewise, the relationship of the soul to the body (monism versus dualism) was also a debatable matter, as becomes clear slightly further on in Gregory/Macrina’s discussion, where (s)he contrasts the soul’s peculiarity and individuality (ἐν ἐξηλλαγμένῃ τε καὶ ἰδιαζούσῃ φύσει) with the coarseness of the body which it accompanies (παρὰ τὴν σωματικὴν παχυμέρειαν).⁴³ At first glance, such a contrast may seem like a basic statement of the dualistic soul, comprised of a ‘special thinking substance’ (ἰδιάζον νοητῆς οὐσίας).⁴⁴ However, there are subtleties, and this is far from the Cartesian substance dualism that is so familiar in the modern soul debate. In fact, a careful reading demonstrates that Gregory’s anthropology veers towards a kind of practical monism, since it is sufficiently holistic that he sees the human person – body and soul – as one psychosomatic being.⁴⁵ The soul exists inseparably with the body, always closely associated

‘Memory and Individuality in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione*’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18 (2010), pp. 369–92; see p. 378 especially.

⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.*, vol. 5 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p. 433.

⁴³ Greek text from PG 46:28. This passage is translated (not so accurately) by Schaff and Wace as, ‘And our conception of it [the soul] is this; that it exists, with a rare and peculiar nature of its own, independently of the body with its gross texture.’ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, p. 433.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 435; Greek text from PG 46:36.

⁴⁵ R. A. Norris, *Manhood and Christ: A Study in the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), pp. 28–9. John Behr, ‘The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa’s *De hominis officio*’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999), pp. 219–47, see pp. 226–30 especially. Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Anagogical Approach* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 103.

with it:⁴⁶ body and soul are one whole as a human is one whole; the soul comes into being when the body is born, such that the two grow and develop together;⁴⁷ and even after death, when the body is dissolved into its constituent atoms and scattered far and wide, the soul recognises and remains with each atom, being the means by which they are reassembled at the resurrection of the dead.⁴⁸ There is therefore no sense in which the soul might be separable from material/physical reality, although the soul is not reducible to it.⁴⁹ The upshot is that Gregory/Macrina is not quite a physicalist (in the reductive sense), but then neither is (s)he obviously a dualist; (s)he is, at any rate, a confirmed holist in both life and death.⁵⁰ In fact, her/his position is not unlike that of ‘non-reductive physicalism’ in today’s soul debate. Significantly, (s)he uses the language of the soul in a heavily metaphorical way, to capture aspects of the spiritual life that are not reducible to the physical. For instance, in Gregory/Macrina’s protracted discussion of the parable of Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31 – a parable which is often cited as evidence today that the New Testament can conceive of a disembodied afterlife – the metaphorical nature of the parable is stressed by Gregory/Macrina, such that (s)he interprets it as an allegory of the moral life during our earthly (present) existence, and of the sins that may consequently cling to the soul after death.⁵¹ When (s)he concludes this section by speaking of the disembodied soul ‘soaring up to the Good’ unhindered by the flesh, it is to make an allegorical point about the need to be free from the sins of

⁴⁶ Hence the famous definition, ‘The soul is an essence created, and living, and intellectual, transmitting from itself to an organised and sentient body the power of living and of grasping objects of sense, as long as a natural constitution capable of this holds together.’ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, p. 433.

⁴⁷ A point explored in Gregory’s *On the Making of Humankind*, chs 28–9 (in *Gregory of Nyssa*, pp. 419–22). See also Zachhuber, who investigates the relationship between Gregory’s traducianism and Apollinarius’: Johannes Zachhuber, *Human Nature in Gregory of Nyssa: Philosophical Background and Theological Significance* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2000), pp. 160–1.

⁴⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, pp. 437–8, 445–6; *The Great Catechism* 8, in *Gregory of Nyssa*, pp. 483, 489.

⁴⁹ Also, the soul/mind has a higher theological status than the body in Gregory’s thought, since it is the soul alone that is made in God’s image. Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 104.

⁵⁰ This point is made clear by Macrina’s rejoinder of the example of the water organ against Gregory’s sceptical physicalism. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, pp. 435–6. If thought could emerge by itself spontaneously from the organic body alone, then it would be like a musical instrument building itself and playing itself spontaneously.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 447–8.

the flesh in this life so as to avoid a ‘second death’ at the Judgement.⁵² This, to my mind, is much more like a practical monism than a Cartesian dualism.

The ‘soaring up to the Good’ is reminiscent of Gregory’s famous concept of ἐπέκτασις, which appears in a number of his works (especially in his *Commentary on Song of Songs*) and presents his view of the soul in even fuller theological perspective. Hinting at the ‘straining forward’ of Philippians 3:13,⁵³ Gregory’s ἐπέκτασις captures the idea of the dynamic transformation of the entire believer into the likeness of Christ. This can be related to Gregory’s christology, where Gregory describes the transformation of Jesus’ human nature by means of the divine.⁵⁴ Gregory’s most celebrated image pictures Christ’s human nature encountering the divine as like a drop of vinegar mingling with the ocean.⁵⁵ In an important reading of this analogy, Brian Daley argues that Gregory sees the humanity of Jesus as no longer discernible in any of its own qualities – being so dominated by the divine that it is, to all intents and purposes, identical with it – yet the humanity continues to exist and to undergo further change.⁵⁶ Human characteristics such as mortality and disease are swallowed up, while the ever-changeability of human nature remains. And since the risen Christ is the ‘first fruits’ of the transformed humanity, Daley argues that every believer can therefore be caught up into the same process of eternal transformation.⁵⁷

Daley’s reading of Gregory’s christology parallels Gregory’s ἐπέκτασις, especially in the sense of eternal transformation within ἐπέκτασις. For eternal it truly is: in Morwenna Ludlow’s exploration of the ἐπέκτασις motif it is to be seen not as a period of change which reaches its final state of perfection at the eschaton; rather, it is humankind’s eschatological state.⁵⁸

⁵² Ibid., pp. 448–9.

⁵³ ‘Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward (ἐπεκτεινόμενος) to what lies ahead’.

⁵⁴ Gregory’s christology is not without its conceptual problems: scholars have variously found Gregory puzzling, and difficult to categorise within the scholarly pigeonholes of the period. Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa*, pp. 98–104. Nevertheless, Daley makes a strong argument for taking Gregory on his own terms: Daley, ‘Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation’, p. 88.

⁵⁵ *Antirheticus* 42, and *Against Eunomius* 3.3 (or 5.5 in the edition translated by Schaff and Wace, 1994, p. 181). See Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 99, and Daley, ‘Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation’, p. 87, for further details concerning this analogy. Widely cited, the drop of vinegar analogy is not without its problems of interpretation either. Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa*, pp. 99–106.

⁵⁶ Daley, ‘“Heavenly Man” and “Eternal Christ”’, p. 483.

⁵⁷ Daley, ‘Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation’, p. 94.

⁵⁸ Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa*, pp. 131–2.

There is no state of blessed stasis and perfection to be attained one glorious day: instead, the process of eternal change into perfection is human destiny. Since Christians hope for resurrection one day – a resurrection like that of Christ – the complete human condition will be caught up into this: flesh and body as well as mind and soul, and also our complex networks of human relationships.⁵⁹ Gregory thus offers a holistic view of the human condition, capturing body, mind and soul in community, and all in contemplation of the divine. And significantly, ἐπέκτασις operates in this life too, through the soul/mind's cognitive trajectory of ascent into the mysteries of God.

Therefore, if the modern soul debate is inclined to pigeonhole the soul into either Platonic/Cartesian (an eternal and unchangeable substance distinct from the body) or Aristotelian (the form of the body) terms, then we miss the force of Gregory's conception. The soul is on a different plane from the body, but its changeability and its inextricable links with the body are integral to the soul's identity as part of the entire process of human straining forward. For Gregory, the entire human person, including our rational soul and intellect, is subject to change and transformation, and that is precisely how humans are saved by Christ. And therefore, as Ludlow points out, Gregory's soteriology links human ontology – our state of being – with epistemology – our state of knowing.⁶⁰ Rather like Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa believes that theology – and the doing of it – is transformative and soteriological.⁶¹ The doing of theology may be a never-ending task (an uphill struggle perhaps), but that is a good thing, not bad, since it is fundamentally the desire of the human mind/soul to grow and to know and to love God more deeply.⁶² Gregory's language may at times appear to envision a disembodied soul, especially when he speaks of the soul's ascent towards God, but it is an apophatic metaphor intended to capture the intellectual ascent of the soul/mind, as well as the soul/mind's 'reaching-out to God in love', in this life as much as the next.⁶³ In the Hebrew Bible, the word שֶׁמֶת (habitually translated 'soul' in English) frequently appears in contexts that refer to the whole person's drives (including for food and water, e.g. Ps 107:9; Prov 25:25), desires, and yearnings, which may be spiritual (e.g. Ps 42; 130:6), or even sexual (e.g. Song of Songs 3). 'Soul' is therefore an ideal term to use when speaking scripturally of the mind in its mode of contemplation and adoration: it is the whole human life in active search of God. It is no accident

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 126, 130.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 271–5.

⁶¹ Needless to say, this is good news for those of us who do theology for a living.

⁶² Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa*, p. 291.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

that some of Gregory's most intense ἐπέκτασις language concerning the soul is to be found in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, reflecting on this biblical text's deep undercurrents of eroticism and desire for full personal realisation through seeking after the other in love. To read this language in polarised terms (embodied versus disembodied, dualistic versus monistic) is to miss the theological force and beauty of Gregory's vision.

This last point is particularly valuable in light of our present tendency to overliteralise talk of the soul. In his *Great Catechism* Gregory suggests that we simply cannot understand the soul and how it coheres with the body: the soul is inextricably mysterious, like the union between God and human in Christ, or like the making of the original creation.⁶⁴ The causal joints between body and mind, creation and Creator are beyond our understanding, he appears to suggest; nevertheless, those causal joints must be there.

Application to the modern soul debate

The various stances on the soul adopted by these three figures from the fourth century – Apollinarius of Laodicea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa – are subtle and complex, and I have only sketched their thinking in outline here. There are parallels with the modern discussion on the soul, but since the modern discussion is fixated on issues of substance and form, and dualism versus monism, these fourth-century thinkers offer many insights that our current debate completely overlooks. All three thinkers see the soul – the rational mind – as the soteriological bridge between ontology and epistemology. And for the Cappadocians the soul must be affirmed ontologically precisely because it is the theatre of knowing, especially the knowing of Christ, the goal of any Christian. At the same time the soul is the theatre of opposition to knowing Christ: the dividing wall, the location of sin, that theological concept which is as elusive as the soul is elusive.

By synthesising my presentation of these three thinkers, I should like to offer seven considerations for the current soul debate, considerations which (I believe) the debate has not yet reflected upon, but which emerge from the Apollinarian controversy as being of prime soteriological importance:

1. The existence and nature of the human soul was a matter of debate in the fourth century, as it is in ours. Full-blown physicalism was a viable option, as the dialogue between Gregory of Nyssa and Macrina makes clear. However, there was a concern to avoid reductionism: the two Gregoryses appeared to feel that the reality of the human soul as something

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Great Catechism* 11, p. 486.

'extra' must be affirmed, because pure physicalism alone was simply too reductive in theological terms.

2. As Apollinarius realised, the human mind/soul is a necessary soteriological battleground: it is the prime locus of sin in the human condition. And as the Gregorys realised, doing away with Christ's human soul means that sin can no longer be defeated: Christ must be epistemically open to sin in order to deal with it ontologically. In other words, Christ cannot save humans by losing his mind, and he cannot defeat it in the flesh alone. The point is that sin cannot be reduced to the flesh, but Christ must save our thoughts too.
3. Transferring this to the modern debate, the reality of human consciousness as a theological arena in its own right distinct from the flesh needs to be affirmed in order to capture the significance of sin. As Gregory of Nazianzus reminds us, the soul is the 'wall of partition' between the flesh and the divine, the place where Christ does his work, and where spiritual transformation is focussed. It is, in short, the 'causal joint' through which the divine work of soteriology takes place. To deny the soul (in this context) is to deny the causal joint and to embrace a deistic deity who is powerless to save.
4. In other words, a reductionist position that puts too much emphasis on the physicality of the human condition alone cannot capture the full significance of sin nor of Christian soteriology, both of which are theological entities not easily reducible to the physical.
5. This does not necessarily mean that the only solution is to affirm a fully dualist disembodied soul. Gregory of Nyssa, for one, seems to have operated within a position somewhere between what we might call monism and dualism. It was, in any case, fully holistic in both life and death.
6. In fact, none of the three thinkers was a strict dualist, and all attempted to describe a holistic anthropology of some kind. None of them conceived of the soul as a kind of detachable 'mini me', but as 'me' in the mode of rationality: changeable, finite, but striving always to grow towards the light. In all three thinkers talk of the soul was the epistemological bridge to knowing and loving (or rejecting) God.
7. Therefore, our modern talk of the soul must grasp the fact that it is not only possible but necessary to speak in mystical and metaphorical terms of disembodiment while holding on to a monist-like and holistic position. This is essentially Gregory of Nyssa's vision of ἐπέκτασις. To interpret this literally as referring to a dualistic disembodied soul is to misunderstand it altogether, and to fail to recognise that there are large areas of Christian mystical and soteriological thought where our modern scientific desire for

precision in material/physical terms is completely ineffective. In short, the modern soul debate must be careful not to miss the point.

In light of these seven considerations, I believe it is clear that the modern soul debate needs to move beyond its preoccupations with substance versus form, and reductionism versus emergentism. It is not that these issues are irrelevant, but that they have been allowed to control the debate to such a degree that the real value of ‘soul language’ – namely its ability to capture soteriological and mystical categories in a concise way – has been lost to sight. In short, talk of the soul has been overliteralised to the extent that the only question that is seen to matter is whether it is a ‘thing’ that exists or not. If we must speculate on the soul as a ‘thing’, then I suggest that the above seven considerations are not incompatible with an approximately physicalist position, and this would be my own preferred solution.⁶⁵ But the overriding point of my argument is that a view of the soul must be developed which considers *theological entities* of primary importance (such as sin and salvation), and which engages meaningfully with mystical ideas such as deification. Ray Anderson, working within the perspective of non-reductive physicalism, has already pointed out (albeit very briefly) the holistic nature of the body/soul unity in biblical perspective, and how this picture incorporates the effects of sin, producing disorder at physical, social, psychological and spiritual levels.⁶⁶ My response is that, while we would certainly want to acknowledge the psychosomatic (and other tangible/visible) effects of sin, this cannot be the only level at which sin is acknowledged in the human condition, or else we will fall into the deterministic trap of asking all over again, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ (John 9:2). Rather, the soul as ‘dividing wall’ and causal joint needs to be more the focus of attention than it is at present, without tying it down futilely to some modern-day equivalent of Descartes’ pineal gland.

In sum, the fourth-century Apollinarian controversy – which concerned the question of whether Jesus has a human rational soul/mind or not – emphasises theological categories that have been lost to sight in the

⁶⁵ My reading of the Cappadocian anthropology suggests that it is not unlike a more expansive or emergentist physicalist position such as non-reductive physicalism, but I would not want to nail my colours to the mast here so firmly as to claim a particular kind of physicalist position. I would, in any case, want to avoid a heavily reductionist approach such as Francis Crick’s well-known ‘you’re nothing but a pack of neurons’ view, if for no other reason than it seeks to close down theological doors rather than open them. Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), p. 3.

⁶⁶ Ray S. Anderson, ‘On Being Human: The Spiritual Saga of a Creaturely Soul’, in Brown et al., *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, pp. 175–94, see p. 182 especially.

contemporary soul debate: namely the place of sin in the human mind, the soteriological role of Christ which connects epistemic and ontological categories, and mystical talk of deification ('the ascent of the soul'). I have proposed that it is not necessary to adopt a full-blown dualist perspective in order to explore these ideas, since the original thinkers did not do so. Rather, I have suggested ways in which these ideas need to be explored within the context of physicalism as a starting point, in order to develop the contemporary monistic paradigm further.