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Maximus' Opuscula and the Concept of the Hypostatic Union

Maximus' the Confessor probably most important contribution to theology, as is well known, was his defence of the integrity of human nature in Christ. Maximus's Christology was shaped as a critical response to the theology that suggested one will (Monothelitism) and one activity (Monoenergism) in Christ, as a way of making a bridge to the Monophysites.¹

Maximus is, furthermore, known as a 'Confessor' precisely because of his defence of the Orthodox teaching on the Person of Christ, in whom both natures, divine and human, are perfectly preserved.² In other words, he became a 'Confessor' because, by defending the doctrine of the Person of Christ, he safeguarded the integrity of human nature. We should not forget that, when the Confessor writes about the integrity of human nature, he speaks about the *hypostatic (i.e., personal) union* of two natures. This means that the union is inconceivable unless it is performed as a personal union. There is little doubt that, for Maximus, there is no nature in 'naked' and that hypostasis or person has ontological primacy over nature. However, this does not abolish the dialectical relationship between nature and person since as much as nature is preconditioned by hypostasis so is hypostasis by nature. In *Opuscula* Maximus writes,

The fact that no nature is without hypostasis does not make it into a hypostasis but rather into something hypostatized (enypostatōn), so that it should not be conceived simply as a property that can only be distinguished [from the hypostasis] in thought, but rather is recognized as a form (eidos) in fact (pragmatikos). Even so, the fact that a hypostasis is not without its essence does not make the hypostasis into an essence, but shows it to be essential (enousion); it should not be thought of as a mere quality [of nature], but must be seen as truly existing together with that in which the qualities are grounded [that is, with a nature].³

This paper will argue that Maximus' apology of the human nature, and in particular his view of that nature's capability to penetrate the divine,⁴ requires a more solid ground in

¹ Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, (London, New York, Routledge, 1996), 48.

² Louth, 48.

³ Maximus the Confessor, *Opuscula Theologica et Polemica*; PG 91, 205AB.

⁴ Louth, 189. As we see, Louth translates the term *simfyias* not as 'mutual adhesion' but as 'mutual coming together.' Emphasis mine.

the form of a specific and novel ontology, which is lacking from the Confessor's work. Put simply, if God is the creator of the human nature, how can He not have all of its characteristics, and if He does, then there is nothing left that would belong solely and specifically to the created. The classical answer to this problem is that it is exactly the createdness and corporeality of the human nature that account for its *differentia specifica*. In that case, however, there must be something 'outside' of God from which He brings forth the created since, again, if the creation came 'out of God' (*Ek theou*), createdness and corporeality would also be divine properties.

In my view, the attempt to secure valid ontological status for the creature was the main reason why the concept of the creation 'out of nothing' was brought into play in the first place. Of course, *ex nihilo* was also introduced to be the ground for God's freedom. But God is free because He is able to create the other in whom there is a different ontological identity, in-existent in his Creator. In other words, God cannot be free unless after the act of creation there is *more* being than there was before.

Christian theology rejected the Platonic concept of the '*nihil*'. After all, it threatens God's absoluteness in two ways: first, because it is pre-existent and consequently could be regarded as a second deity; second, because by the simple fact of being there it circumscribed God's absolute freedom. Thus, the notion of *me on* or relative non-being was replaced by *ouk on* or absolute non-being. However, the introduction of the absolute non-being cannot be the solution since, as we know (on this issue, the Greeks seem to have the point), out of the (absolute) nothing, nothing comes out (*ex nihilo nihil fit*). We, therefore, see in Maximus how with many nuances he equated *ex nihilo* and *ex Deo* (*Ek theou*), as this was the case also with Irenaeus (*a semetipso*), Gregory of Nyssa, and Dionysius the Areopagite.⁵ By almost generally accepting the concept of *ouk on* and by failing to grasp the necessity of a dialectical non-being that stands in productive opposition to God, Christian theology confined itself to the ipseity of monistic ontology: out of God, only God comes out. There is no room for the creature with full ontological identity. Surely, in the doctrine of deification the Church Fathers envisioned a glorious prospect for the human

⁵ See Paul Blowers, *From Nonbeing to Eternal Well-Being: Creation ex nihilo in the Cosmology and Soteriology of Maximus the Confessor*, in *Light on Creation: Ancient Commentators in Dialogue and Debate on the Origin of the World*, ed. Beert Roskam and Joseph Verheyden, (Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, Germany, 2017), 175.

being. But it is not clear what the role and the purpose of the deified and glorified human nature in Christ and in the Trinity would be. As a contemporary philosopher observed,

The teachers of the Church had a doctrine of the *theosis* of man, but in this *theosis* there is no man at all. The very problem of man is not even put. But man is godlike not only because he is capable of suppressing his own nature and thus freeing a place for divinity. There is godlikeness in human nature itself, in the very human voice of that nature. Silencing the world and the passions liberates man. God desires that not only God should exist, but man as well.⁶

Before I adumbrate a possible third notion of non-being, I should like to examine on what ontological foundations Maximus builds his concept of the hypostatic union.

Even from Maximus' early writings, it is clear that '*synthesis*' and not '*confusion*' is the first structural principle of all creation.⁷ This is why the question of Christ's human nature is not only an anthropological issue but also cosmological and ontological because it touches upon the meaning and destiny of God's entire creation.⁸ I speak about ontological freedom or freedom to be 'other in an absolute ontological sense'.⁹ Indeed, Maximus himself does not define freedom simply as freedom of will. On the contrary, for him, freedom of will is '*autoexousion*' or the power of absolute self-determination. Maximus maintains,

And again, if the man was made after the image of the blessed godhead which is beyond being, and since the divine nature is self-determined, then he is by nature endowed with free will. For it has been stated already that the Fathers defined 'will' as self-determination (*autoexousion*).¹⁰

I repeat, however, that since there is no nature in 'naked' we need to transfer our investigation from the natural to the personal or hypostatic level. This is what Maximus does himself when he speaks about 'hypostatic difference'. In *Opuscula* 13, Maximus

⁶ *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. D. A. Lowrie, ed. B. Jakim (San Raphael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009); 84 [further in the text MCA; the Russian version *Smysl tvorchestva: Opyt opravdaniia cheloveka* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1991; further in the text STv)], 114.

⁷ Louth, 207.

⁸ 'Everyone recognizes that his ontology and cosmology are extensions of his Christology, in that the synthesis of Christ's concrete person is not only God's final thought for the world but also his original plan.' Louth, 207.

⁹ John Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, ed. Paul McPartlan (New York: T&T Clark, 2006; [further in the text CO]), 11.

¹⁰ Maximus the Confessor, *Disputatio cum Pyrrho*, PG 91, 304CD. The translation according to Joseph P. Farrell, *The Disputation with Pyrrhus of our Father among the Saints Maximus the Confessor*, (South Canaan, Pa, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press 1990), pp. 24-25.

writes, ‘we anathematize Sabellius not for proclaiming the natural unity in the Holy Trinity, but for not declaring the hypostatic difference.’¹¹

Thus, what is Maximus’ concept of person? We need to note that the Chalcedonian definition of the mutual indwelling of the two natures in Christ, although mentioning the term person, does not give any further explanation as to how to understand this concept. If Christ is the most significant of all divine mysteries,¹² as Maximus claims, it is because he is a Person, a Person that hypostatically unites the two natures.¹³

Hans Urs von Balthasar also stresses the hypostatic union when he writes,

A solution to the problem was impossible as long as one was unable to recognize any other dimension of being than that of ‘nature’ or ‘essence’—the dimension considered by ancient Greek philosophy. For the result of this one-dimensionality was the conclusion that all ‘essence’ (*ousia, physis*) possessed reality in itself, or was at least the key element, the structure, the law of some really existing thing.¹⁴

This suggests that the Chalcedonian definition is not only incomplete but that without a proper concept of the person it is unable to sustain its main claim about the character of the union of the two natures. I argue that the theology of person thus appears to be an indispensable foundation for every ontological, cosmological, Trinitarian or Christological, investigation. If God is a Triune God, a God who is three Persons, then every theological investigation ought to start by investigating what is meant by the person; that is, to start by trying to solve the ‘world’s most significant and central mystery.’

Maximus builds his ontology and his view of the person upon the foundation laid by the Cappadocians. What was ‘revolutionary’ in the writings of the Cappadocians regarding the concept of hypostasis? The reason for the inability of ancient Greek philosophy to create an ontology of human individuality is deeply rooted in the basic principle in which this thought set itself. The principle is that being constitutes a unity in spite of the

¹¹ *Opuscula* 13. 1 (PG 91), 145A.

¹² Following Maximus, von Balthasar calls it ‘the world’s central mystery.’ H. U. von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003; [further in the text CL], 212.

¹³ Thus Maximus’ favourite term ‘theandric’ in his work is consistently related to the personal relationship established in Christ. As Thunberg observed, ‘theandric’ designates the unique and new relationship that is established in Jesus Christ as being both fully human and fully divine... One might also say that the full implications of the term ‘theandric’ could only become apparent after the definitions of the Council of Chalcedon, where what is *theandric* in Christ is also defined as *personal*.” L. Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos; The Vision of St Maximus the Confessor*, (Crestwood New York, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 71.

¹⁴ CL, 210.

multiplicity of beings. Every differentiation or individuation, every *becoming*, is regarded as a deterioration of the being.¹⁵ To have a person in the ancient Greek context means to have something accidental to one's being or one's true hypostasis. The ultimate ontological category is still 'hypostasis' with a meaning of 'substance' or 'nature'.¹⁶

What was necessary for the radical change in our understanding of the world and the being of the human so that they both would be characterised by freedom? According to John Zizioulas, the most important amendment was the identification of the person with the ontological and eschatological identity of the human being. It was the Cappadocians in their wrestling with the problem of Trinitarian theology who provided this prerequisite.¹⁷

The full scope of the philosophical 'revolution' is perceived only when we know that the term 'hypostasis' was never connected to the term 'person' in Greek philosophy. For the Greeks, 'person' would have any other connotation but that of the essence of the human being, whereas 'hypostasis' was eventually identified with the concept of 'substance'. Zizioulas does not go into the detailed analysis of the historical background of the 'revolution' but instead gives a brief account of its deeper significance that involves a twofold thesis: (a) the person is not something added to a particular being with an already established ontological hypostasis; the person is itself the hypostasis of the being, that is, there is no being unless the substance is hypostasised. (b) Thus, being ceases to be a fundamental ontological category and the source of other entities; it is replaced now by the person who becomes the constitutive element of beings.¹⁸

This radical break in Greek ontology was prepared by what Zizioulas names as the two basic 'leavenings' in patristic theology. The first concerned the deconstruction of the absolute cosmological necessity by the introduction of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, which means that the world was no longer considered as co-eternal with God and thus limiting divine freedom; God's free decision is now the source of the world and the world is a product of freedom.¹⁹

¹⁵ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997; [further in the text BC]),

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¹⁶ BC, 33.

¹⁷ BC, 35.

¹⁸ BC, 39.

¹⁹ BC, 39.

The second 'leavening' represented even further reappraisal of the monistic ontology. It was not enough to argue that the being of the world is traced back to freedom, but that the being of God was a result of a free person, the Father. Since the source of the divine being is the Father's person, the unity of God was no longer in the one substance of God, but in the free person of the Father.²⁰

Out of the several ideas on how to solve the problem of communion and otherness in the works of the Eastern Church Fathers, Zizioulas favours the one offered by Maximus the Confessor. Maximus proposes to reconcile participation in the divine life and freedom of creation through the *Logos* as a personal principle. Key to Maximus' ontology is his idea of the *logoi* of beings according to which every being has its *logos* or particular identity. Without its particular *logos*, the being would cease to exist. However, Maximus distinguishes between *diaphora* (difference) and *diairesis* (division), which means that difference does not necessarily lead to division. How can communion and otherness coincide in an ontology according to Maximus?

In Maximus' view, and in contrast to Origen or Evagrius, the *Logos* is not conceived as an impersonal *nous*, but as the Son, the second Person of the Trinity. This means that the gap between God and creation is bridged in a personal or hypostatic manner, that is, in the *hypostatic union* of the divine and human nature. The idea of 'hypostatic union' requires, furthermore, an ontology that is based not on the nature of beings (on *what* the beings are), but on the 'way of beings' (on *how* they are). For this purpose, Maximus makes the distinction between *logos* and *tropos*. In other words, in every being there is a permanent aspect and an adjustable one. In the framework of the Incarnation, thus, the *logos physeos* or the *logos* of nature remains fixed whereas the *tropos hyparxeos* or the mode of being is adjusted to allow for unity and freedom. Zizioulas explains that this amounts to a 'tropic identity' or to an ontology of *tropos*, of *how* the things are.

We are dealing here with two kinds of identity. The first one implies natural otherness, and in itself and by itself, that is, as substance or nature *per se*, allows for no possibility of communion. The second one concerns not nature *per se*, its *logos*, but the way it relates, its *tropos*, and it is this that makes communion possible... It is because of and through their *tropos* that the divine and the creaturely natures can unite since it is the *tropos* that is capable of adjustment. The substance is relational not in itself but in and through and because of the 'mode of being' it possesses.²¹

²⁰ BC, pp. 40-41.

²¹ CO, 25.

Maximian ontology is an ontology of *tropos*: God and the world are united while preserving their otherness only in the *person* of the divine *Logos*; ‘it is a *person* that makes this possible because it is only a person that can express communion and otherness simultaneously...’²² This point is of crucial importance and requires special attention.

We are focusing on the question, *which particular quality of person makes the possible simultaneous expression of communion and otherness?* What does it mean that the person is capable of adjusting its mode of being, thus preserving unity and particularity? Maximus asserts that each being has different hypostasis by virtue of the *logos* of personal otherness.

[Although some beings share the same essence and are consubstantial by virtue of the *logos* of the essential community], on the other hand, they are of different hypostases (*ἑτερονόστατα*) by virtue of the *logos* of personal otherness, which distinguishes one from another. The hypostases do not coincide in their characteristic distinguishing marks, but each one by virtue of the sum of its characteristic properties bears most particular *logos* of its own hypostasis, and in accordance with this *logos* it admits of no community with those that are connatural and consubstantial with it.²³

It is the most particular *logos* of hypostasis that distinguishes one being from another. Without the *logos* of personal otherness, the being would not live in communion, because communion entails otherness. There would be no synthesis in the relationship between beings but only confusion. It follows that a hypostasis, if it is ‘absolutely other in an ontological sense’, also needs to have a *radically unique expression and actualization* of one’s otherness. Thus, living according to one’s most particular *logos* means to adjust one’s mode of being, to preserve one’s otherness.

One’s otherness is one’s unique identity or *logos* in the state of potentiality. But as manifested—and it needs to be manifested since the self has to be relational²⁴—it is perceived as a radical newness—if we wish to be consistent—even for God. To act according to one’s radically inimitable *logos* means to offer to the other something new and

²² CO, 29.

²³ *Ep.* 15 (PG 91), 552BC. Cited in Melchisedec Törönen, *Union and Distinction in the Thought of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 61.

²⁴ ‘When I say, not that I am, but that I exist... I glimpse more or less obscurely the fact that my being is not only present to my own awareness but that it is a manifest being. It might be better, indeed, instead of saying, “I exist”, to say, “I am manifest”. The Latin prefix *ex*—meaning *out, outwards, out from*—in “exist” has the greatest importance.’ Gabriel Marcel, *Mystery of Being*, (Chicago, Illinois, Gateway Edition, 1960), pp. 111-112.

incomparable, to enrich and amplify him. Divine and human nature cannot remain in a synthesis, unconfused, unless the hypostasis, in which nature is enhypostasised, possesses, and lives according to, one's most personal logos. In *Opuscula 7* Maximus writes,

Then, as he showed that the natural energies of Christ the God, who is composed of both, are perfectly preserved, that of his Godhead through the almighty command, and that of his humanity through the touch, he proves them to be thoroughly united by their *mutual coming together and interpenetration*...²⁵

If we read this paragraph on the personal level, it follows that by being absolutely other in an ontological sense, a human hypostasis is capable of penetrating, i.e., augmenting and enlarging the divine hypostases. This would, however, imply that the person cannot be created *ek theou* since God can give only what He possesses. God cannot give what He does not have, so if He creates out of Himself, he is unable to create an ontological other. Zizioulas comes to this conclusion when he writes that the person is possible only as 'uncreated'.

Only theology can treat of the genuine, the authentic person, because the authentic person, as absolute ontological freedom, must be 'uncreated', that is, unbounded by any 'necessity', including its own existence.²⁶

But since the human person is not 'uncreated', the concept of the hypostasis as absolute ontological otherness is inconceivable.

We could argue, nonetheless, that the person is 'uncreated' if by 'uncreatedness' we imply that in spite of being created the person is not ontologically determined. Each person would need to have something that no other person, including the Creator, does not possess. This is plausible only if we assume that God does not create 'out of Himself'. God needs to create out of something that is 'outside' of Him. This is the third notion of the *nihil*, which I have mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The integrity of the created is possible only if it originates from a region that is 'uncreated' and, as such, is 'outside' of God.

²⁵ Louth, 189. As we see, Louth translates the term *simfyias* not as 'mutual adhesion' but as 'mutual coming together.' Emphasis mine.

²⁶ BC, 143.