Modern Theology 35:3 July 2019
ISSN 0266-7177 (Print)
ISSN 1468-0025 (Online)
DOI:10.1111/moth.12508

CONTEMPLATING THE MONAD WHO SAVES US: MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR AND JOHN OF DAMASCUS ON DIVINE SIMPLICITY

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Abstract

Daley explores divine simplicity according to Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus, grounding his account in their classical philosophical antecedents. He notes that often we think of the sixth and seventh centuries as devoted to questions about Jesus Christ, not about God per se. Admittedly, the aftermath of the Council of Chalcedon produced ongoing controversy in the East regarding the unity of the two natures of Christ, for example, whether Christ had one operation or two. Maximus, a follower of Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem, became embroiled in controversy through his firm rejection of the effort by Emperor Heraclius and Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople to unite the churches in the East by holding solely to a single activity and a single will in Christ. Maximus's position won out at the Third Council of Constantinople (680-1). Daley draws attention here, however, to the relationship of these Christological debates to the understanding of God, and especially what it means to speak of the "divine nature" and the "divine will." This topic required of Christian thinkers not merely philosophical reflection but also Trinitarian reflection. Daley's point is that it well behooves us to look closely into what Maximus and John of Damascus have to say about divine simplicity, in light of the more central controversies in which these Church Fathers were engaged.

Introduction

Most of us probably think of the seventh and eighth centuries – the end of the "Golden Age" of Greek Patristic literature, or even its derivative appendage – as the time when Eastern theologians argued over the fine points of what was or was not implied by the Christological definition of Chalcedon. There is surely good reason to think this way. The formula of the Council of 451 did not put an end to divisions in Christianity over how to conceive of the person of Jesus; if anything, it made such divisions more absolute and more permanent. Many Christians, especially in Syria and Egypt, who heard in its language portraying "one and the same Christ" existing "in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation," a guarded echo of the metaphysically "divided Christ" proclaimed by Nestorius and his Antiochene colleagues, left the official communion of the Eastern Empire within two decades of the Council's end: Egyptian protesters in 457 rejected the pro-Chalcedonian patriarch appointed

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by Emperor Leo I and elected the "monophysite" Timothy "Aelurus" as head of a new, independent Coptic Church; Syrian dissenters, some ten years later, elected the anti-Chalcedonian monk Peter "the Fuller" as their bishop, and so gave birth to the Syrian Orthodox communion. Followers of Nestorius, on the other hand, had left the Churches of Constantinople and Antioch for East Syria after Nestorius's condemnation in 431, and would shortly move further eastward, into the Persian Empire and even as far as China, laying the foundation for what is now called the "Church of the East." The religious unity of the Christian Empire was definitively broken in the late fifth century, but the problem of finding an adequate formulation for Christian faith in the person of Jesus – and so of restoring unity – remained, and continued to torment both theologians and politicians for the next four hundred years.

The question of Jesus' person, of the mixture or interweaving of his two distinct natures and later (in the seventh century) of the continuing operation or activity of each of those natures – more specifically, the related question of the activity of the Savior's will, as God and as a human being – remained at the center of the theological agenda, despite conciliar statements that carried, in the Roman Empire, the force of law. Could the Christ of Chalcedon, one hypostasis or individual in two complete and unmingled natures, still be thought of as the source of a unified set of *operations* – of a single, "new, theandric activity," as the Ps.-Dionysius had enigmatically and fleetingly suggested?[1] Would this "new activity" include the operation of a single *will*, at once divine and human, in the Word made flesh? Would such an interpretation of the Chalcedonian Christ satisfy those in the Eastern Empire who found the officially recognized language of the Council too divisive, as suggesting too great a distance between God and the words and acts of Jesus?

So in the mid-seventh century, new efforts by the Emperor Heraclius and his main theological advisor, Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople, to heal the post-Chalcedonian schisms, along the lines of a single activity and a single will in Christ, led both to cautious acceptance, among the majority of the Empire's bishops, and to vocal rejection by the aged Patriarch Sophronius of Jerusalem and by his spiritual son and intellectual heir, the exiled monk Maximus – later known as "the Confessor."[2] Maximus, ultimately backed by the Western Church at the Lateran Synod of 649, and by all the Empire's Churches that remained in communion at the ecumenically-received Third Council of Constantinople in 680-681, insisted that the "faith of Nicaea," as interpreted by the Councils of Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople II, clearly pointed to a Christ who is fully divine, even "one of the blessed Trinity," as a *subject*, but who himself *acts* personally in distinguishable ways – ways that are either divine or human, but that never blur the infinite ontological boundaries between those two realms. His human will may be "divinized" in its *manner* of willing, Maximus suggests, but it remains a created will. The mode of its operation is surely transformed, but the central identities of human and divine remain what

[1] This is the final phrase of what is called, in the Dionysian corpus, *Letter 4, to Gaius*. This brief document deals with the person of Christ; whether it is as genuine letter, or part of a more systematic treatise by this pseudonymous author, remains a subject of debate.

[2] For the details of the controversy over the operations and wills of Christ in the 530s and 540s, especially for the development of Maximus's response, see my article, "Maximus Confessor, Leontius of Byzantium, and the Late Aristotelian Metaphysics of the Person," in *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through the Resurrection*, ed. Bishop Maxim (Vasiljević) (Belgrade: Sebastian Press, 2013), 55-70. For the chronology and events of the seventh-century Christological controversy, see Polycarp Sherwood, "Constantinople III," in F. X. Murphy and Polycarp Sherwood, *Constantinople II et Constantinople III* (Paris: L'Orante, 1973); Demetrius Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ: Person, Nature and Will in the Christology of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. 62-64. For their background in developments in the Eastern Roman Empire, see Walter E. Kaegi, "Byzantium in the Seventh Century," in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, ed. Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 84-105.

they are. As Maximus frequently expresses the paradox of Christ's natural constitution, "He is divine in a human way, and human in a divine way."[3]

The focal point of these seventh-century controversies, and of the debates in the Eastern Empire that followed – especially that over the Christian use of religious images, which raged in the Greek-speaking Church in the eighth and ninth centuries – was surely how the Christian tradition understood and venerated the person of the Savior. Yet clearly implied in the discussion, and perhaps its more fundamental issue, was how Christians, as disciples of Christ, must understand *God*. Does having a fully human will, a humanity that on the functional level operates as every humanity does, both psychologically and materially, suggest that Jesus does *not* also fully possess the nature of God, or that he is *not*, in himself, the divine individual we call God the Son? Can it be correct to speak of *two* operative natures, *two* functioning wills, in Christ? What does it mean, in any case, to speak of a *divine nature*, or of God's having a *will*? Are these in any way parallel to *human* nature, to a human will? Is it correct to speak of Jesus, the Word made flesh, as having "one *composite* nature (μία φύσις σύνθετος)," formed "out of two," as the opponents of Chalcedon had argued in the late fifth century; or is it better to speak rather – as Chalcedonians like Leontius of Byzantium argued, and as the Second Council of Constantinople (canon 4) had made clear – of a "composite unity in hypostasis": a *subject* formed of God and man, in whom both those disparate realms of reality remain what they are, uniquely related and unified in their action but permanently distinct? Dealing with questions such as these required theologians involved in these late debates about Christ also to reflect more deeply on what we must say, as Christians and as philosophically educated people, about God – about "the Divine." Hence we find dense, often rather technical reflections on the Mystery of God – as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and as a simple, infinite unity or divine Monad, beyond the limits of speech and thought – interwoven with a number of seventh- and eighth-century documents that deal primarily with other aspects of Christian theology or spirituality, or that offer comprehensive syntheses of Christian teaching. We will look here specifically at works of Maximus and John of Damascus.

Philosophical Roots

The idea of the "simplicity of God" had long been a part of Greek thought on ultimate reality. Aristotle, in the *Metaphysics*, had observed that the ultimate principle of all being must be simple and free from all divisible parts, since it cannot be limited by any *matter* it informs, and "everything that lacks matter is indivisible."[4] This was emphasized more strongly in the later Platonist tradition. Plotinus writes, in *Ennead* 5.4.1:

> There must be something *simple* before all things, and this must be *other* than the things which come after it, existing by itself, not mixed with the things which derive from it, and all the same able to be present in a different way to these other things, being really one, and not a different being and then one… For if it is not to be simple, outside all coincidence

[3] See, for example, Maximus, *Dialogue with Pyrrhus* (PG 91.308 CD). For a description of Maximus's Christology, see the thoughtful analysis of Cyril Hovorun, "Maximus, a Cautious Neo-Chalcedonian," in Allen and Neil, *Handbook*, 106-24.

[4] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.9 (1075 a7).

> and composition, it could not be a first principle.., and what is not simple is in need of its simple components so that it can come into existence from them.[5]

Proclus, the influential fifth-century Athenian Neoplatonist, argues this point more strongly still:

> *All that is divine is primordially and supremely simple, and for this reason completely self-sufficient.*
>
> That it is simple is apparent from its unity: all deity is perfectly unitary, and as such is simple in an especial degree. That it is completely self-sufficient may be learned from the reflection that, whereas the composite is dependent – if not upon things external to it, at least upon its own elements – the perfectly simple and unitary, being a manifestation of that Unity which is identical with the Good, is wholly self-sufficient; and perfect simplicity is the character of deity. Being a pure excellence (αὐτοαγαθότης), deity needs nothing extraneous…[6]

If the Divine is the ultimate Good, it cannot be dependent on something else for its existence or its value – even on parts that might constitute it. To be genuinely the source of the being of all other things, it must simply *be*, and be simply itself. It must be utterly *simple*.

Philosophical considerations such as these, even the dense vocabulary of late antique philosophical treatises, were inseparably part of the intellectual world of post-Chalcedonian theology. To some degree, Christian reflection on God, Christ and the world had been formed, since the mid-second century, by secular philosophical discourse. Beginning with the debates with Neo-Arians like Aëtius and Eunomius in the 360s, however, Christian theologians had come increasingly to rely on the argumentative style of the classroom rather than the rhetoric of the pulpit or the Biblical commentary; definitions and theses, chains of syllogisms, question-and-answer dialogues, all followed by anthologies of corroborative excerpts from unimpeachable earlier authorities, came to be increasingly important in the defense of the Nicene tradition of orthodox faith. By the last decades of the fifth century, in the increasingly heated disputes over Chalcedon's formulation of the Mystery of Christ, this Greek "scholastic" style, couched especially in the language of the fifth- and sixth-century Neoplatonic commentaries on the works of Plato and Aristotle then being produced in the philosophical schools of Athens and Alexandria, became the dominant format of Christian theological argument.[7] By the time of Maximus and John of Damascus – both of them monks with a deep academic formation (however that had been acquired) – it seems simply to have been assumed that reflection on the mysteries of faith and spiritual transformation in Christ, although based on Scripture and the tradition of faith rather than simply on the precise use of reason, would be expressed in largely philosophical terms.

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[5] Plotinus, *Ennead* 5.4 (7).1 (Plotinus, *Enneads V*, trans. A. H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library 444 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984], 141). So in the somewhat later essay "Against the Gnostics" (Enn. 2.9 [33].1), Plotinus writes about the ultimate Good: "We call it the First in the sense that it is simplest, and the Self-sufficient, because it is *not composed* of a number of parts; for if it were, it would be dependent upon the things of which it was composed; and we say that it is not *in* something else, because everything which is in something else also comes from something else." (*Ennead* II, trans. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library 441 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1966], 225). See also *Enn*. 5.3 (49).11.

[6] Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, Prop. 127 (trans. E. R. Dodds [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933], 113).

[7] For a full discussion of this fateful development in the way later Greek Christian theology was done, see my article, "Boethius' Theological Tracts and Early Byzantine Scholasticism," *Mediaeval Studies* 46 (1984): 158-91, as well as my article cited in note 2 above.

Maximus the Confessor

The details of Maximus's life, and the growth of his theological mind, remain to a large degree uncertain. According to his standard Greek biography, he seems to have been born in Constantinople around 580, received a high-quality early education, and had begun a promising career in the imperial bureaucracy, when he decided, in his early thirties, to become a monk.[8] After spending two or three years at Chrysopolis, just across the Bosporus from the capital, and ten more years in a new community at Cyzicus, further west on the Sea of Marmara, he is said to have left the area for good in 626, under the threat of a new Persian invasion; after spending some time in Cyprus and perhaps in Alexandria, Maximus apparently settled in a Greek monastic community in the outskirts of Carthage in North Africa, where he remained for some twenty years – taking an active part, through constant correspondence, in the theological debates of the Eastern Empire, but not returning east himself until he was forcibly brought there, near the end of his life, in the early 650s.

Although Maximus is often remembered today for the part he played in the debates over the two operations and wills implied by the Chalcedonian vision of the two natures of Christ, most of his early writings – which seem to date back even to his days as a monk in Cyzicus[9] – have to do with the nature of prayer and the spiritual discipline involved in seeking a deeper union with God; these are heavily influenced by the aphoristic works of the late-fourth-century speculative Origenist, Evagrius of Pontus, and by the Dionysian corpus, presumably dating from a century later. Significantly, it is in these earlier writings, which predate his involvement in the debates over the person of Christ in the 630s and 640s, that we find many of Maximus's strongest affirmations of the radical simplicity of God.

So in his clearly Evagrian *Four Hundred Chapters on Love*, which Sherwood dates before Maximus's move westward in 626,[10] Maximus observes that the Divine Mystery – in contrast to both angels and humans – is free from all the limiting polarities that we experience as moral subjects:

> God as absolute existence, goodness and wisdom (or rather, to speak more properly, as transcending all these things) has no contrary quality whatever. But creatures, because they all have existence, and rational and intelligent ones their aptitude for goodness and wisdom, by participation and grace, *do* have contrary qualities. To existence is opposed nonexistence, to the aptitude for goodness and wisdom is opposed vice and ignorance. For them, to exist forever or not to exist is in the power of their maker…[11]

To be morally or physically changeable, Maximus assumes here, is part of the set of limitations imposed by being a creature, receiving one's being as a gift from a Creator who is free from both

[8] In 1978, however, Sebastian Brock published a hitherto-unknown Syriac biography by an apparently hostile biographer, which argues Maximus was born illegitimate and poor in Palestine, orphaned at an early age, and brought up in one of the monasteries of the Judaean desert, before moving to Constantinople as a young adult. For details, and further efforts to recover his intellectual biography, see my article, "Making a Human Will Divine: Augustine and Maximus on Christ and Human Salvation," in George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Orthodox Readings of Augustine* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 101-26, esp. 106-11. For a summary of the events of Maximus's life, see also Pauline Allen, "Life and Times of Maximus the Confessor," in Allen and Neil, *Handbook*, 3-18.

[9] For the dating of Maximus's works, I am especially indebted to Polycarp Sherwood's pioneering work, *An Annotated Date-List of the Works of Maximus the Confessor,* Studia Anselmiana 30 (Rome: Herder, 1952). Sherwood's dating of Maximus's life and work remains the foundation of virtually all modern scholarship on this author. See now also Marek Janowiak and Phil Booth, "A New Date-List of the Works of Maximus the Confessor," in Allen and Neil, *Handbook*, 19-83.

[10] Janowiak and Booth date them to "before c. 633/4."

[11] *Centuries on Love* 3.27. *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 65.

limit and change. And in his *Two Hundred Chapters on Knowledge*, probably written in Carthage a few years later,[12] Maximus even observes that God's unchanging simplicity of being must be classified, strictly speaking, as unthinkable on the part of created minds, because all thought presupposes the duality of subject and predicate, knower and known:

> Every thought certainly expresses several, or at least a duality of aspects; for it is an intermediary relationship between two extremes, which joins together the thinker and the object thought of. Neither of the two can completely retain simplicity. For the thinker is a subject who bears the power of thinking in himself. And what is thought of is a subject as such, or dwells in a subject, having inherent in it the capacity of being thought of… For there is no being at all which is by itself a simple essence or thought, to the extent of also being an undivided monad. [But] as far as God is concerned, if we say that he is an essence, he has not naturally inherent in him the possibility of being thought of, because he is not composed; if we say that he is thought of, he has no essence which by nature is capable of being a subject of thought… He is entirely above essence and entirely above thought, since he is an invisible monad, simple and without parts… In the multiple, there is diversity, unlikeness, and difference. But in God, who is eminently one and unique, there is only identity, simplicity, and sameness…[13]

In his meditation on the symbolic significance of the liturgy and its physical setting, entitled *The Church's Mystagogy*, also probably written in the early African years [628-630],[14] Maximus sees in the "little entrance" of the ministers, before the reading of the Gospel, a type of the soul's "entrance into the unutterable mysteries: an understanding which is immaterial, simple, immutable, divine, free of all form and shape," by which it comes to at least some awareness – through the working of grace and an initiation into the Scriptures proclaimed in the Church – of the Mystery of God's being as unity and Trinity:

> The same unity and trinity has a unity without composition or confusion and a distinction without separation or division. It is unity by reason of essence or of being, but not by any composition or joining together or confusion; it is trinity by reason of its mode of existence and subsistence (κατὰ τὸν τοῦ πῶς ὑπάρχειν καὶ ὑφεστᾶναι λόγον), but not by any separation or diversity or division… For the holy Trinity of persons is an unconfused unity in essence and in its simple nature; and the holy Unity is a trinity of persons and in its mode of existence (τρόπος τῆς ὑπάρξεως). We are to think of both of these distinctly, as was said, first one way, then the other: one, single, undivided, unconfused, simple, undiminished, and unchangeable divinity, completely one in essence and completely three in persons, and sole ray shining in the single form of one triple-splendored light.[15]

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[12] Sherwood dates them to 630-634, Maximus's early years in North Africa; Janowiak and Booth to "before c/ 633/4."

[13] *Centuries on Knowledge* 1.82-83 (trans. Berthold, 143-44).

[14] Janowiak and Booth: "after the first retreat to the West, before c. 636."

[15] *The Church's Mystagogy* 23 (trans. Berthold, 205-6). See the similar passage in the *Centuries on Knowledge* 2.1 (trans. Berthold, 147-48): "There is one God because one Godhead, one without beginning, simple and supersubstantial, without parts and undivided, identically monad and triad; entirely monad and entirely triad; wholly monad as to substance, and wholly triad as to hypostases. For the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the Godhead, and the Godhead is in Father, Son and Holy Spirit… For neither is the Godhead divisible nor are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit imperfectly God. Rather the whole and complete Godhead is entirely in the entire Father; and wholly complete, it is entirely in the entire Son; and wholly complete, it is entirely in the entire Holy Spirit… For there is one and the same essence, power and act of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and no one of them can exist or be conceived without the others."

Even God's eternal reality as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, revealed in the course of the history of salvation, witnessed to in the Scriptures, and professed in the Church's baptismal Creeds, must be understood as in no way disturbing the utter simplicity of God's being as Monad. God just *is*, always, and always is Father, Son and Spirit.

So at the start of his *Centuries on Knowledge*, Maximus points to this very simplicity of God's being, with the help of the Neoplatonic-Aristotelian conceptions shared by the sixth- and seventh-century philosophical schools, as the reason for arguing that the Divine should not even be thought of, strictly speaking, in terms of essence (οὐσία) or nature (φύσις) at all, since God is "infinitely beyond every essence, power and act."

> God is one, without beginning, incomprehensible, possessing in his totality the full power of being, fully excluding the notion of time and quality in that he is inaccessible to all and not discernible by any being on the basis of any natural representation…
>
> Every essence, which implies in itself its own limit, is naturally a principle of the movement [that is] contemplated in potency to it…
>
> God is not essence, understood as either general or particular, even if he is a principle; nor is he potency, understood as either general or particular, even if he is a means; he is not act, understood as either general or particular, even if he is the end of essential movement discerned in potency. But he is a principle of being who is creative of essence and beyond essence, a ground who is creative of power but beyond power, the active and eternal condition of every act, and – to speak briefly – the Creator of every essence, power, and act, as well as of every beginning, middle, and end.[16]

In other words, what we think of as the "essences" or (speaking more dynamically) the "natures" of the individual things in our experience are the universals that (in a Platonic universe) function as principles for individual things behaving in their characteristic ways – becoming what they are. The path of an object from potency to actuality is inherently implied in its essence, its natural identity. So God must be recognized as beyond essence or nature, because God is free of potency and change, and even of actuality, when that is understood as naturally limited and defined. God *is* Being in its fullest sense, as the source and principle of all that in any way is; but God is also utterly "beyond being," as Dionysius reminds us. Maximus continues:

> God is always properly one and unique by nature. He encloses in himself, in every way, the whole of what being is, in that he is himself even well beyond being itself. If this is the case, absolutely nothing that we *call* being has being at all on its own. Consequently, absolutely nothing that is different from him by essence is seen together with him from all eternity: neither age nor time nor anything dwelling in them.[17] For what is properly being and what is improperly being never come together with each other.[18]

All that exists besides God, in other words, exists because God has created it, given it reality.

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[16] Ibid. 1.1, 3, 4 (trans. Berthold, 129).

[17] As Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine had done, Maximus seems here to be implying a difference between the duration of material creatures in our history – what we might call "calendar time" – and the duration of non-material creatures, such as angelic intelligences and purely intelligible realities, which are outside of our time but are still not eternal as God is.

[18] *Centuries on Knowledge* 1.6 (trans. Berthold, 130).

And intelligent creatures come to know God, Maximus suggests in a number of passages, through a kind of indirect intuition: by recognizing their own (and the world's) relationship of dependency and subordination to God, as well as by seeing in themselves limited participations in God's unlimited perfection – by recognizing that they are indeed made in God's "image and likeness." In a significant passage in *Ambiguum* 10, for instance – a long essay on God's relationship to creation that probably also dates from before the controversies on the energies and wills in the person of Christ[19] – Maximus observes, in a way curiously reminiscent of Augustine's approach in *De Trinitate*, that the created mind or νοῦς, the human intellect, gradually discovers the shape of the Divine Mystery through its knowledge of itself as God's image and likeness.

> Realizing that the soul is situated at the midpoint between God and matter, and that it has the potential to bring both of them together – I am speaking of the mind's potential towards God and sense-perception's potential towards matter – [holy human beings] shake off sense-perception, along with sensible objects, with respect to its habitual activity of relating, and in mind alone become ineffably associated with God. As the soul is made one with God in his fullness, in a way beyond knowing, they [i.e., humans] contemplate it [i.e., the soul] in its fullness, as image of the archetype: containing by likeness in mind, reason, and spirit a resemblance to God, as much as this is possible. Thus they learn, in a mystical way, the unity that is recognized in the Trinity.[20]

The context of Maximus's argument, clearly, is the ascetical practice of the Evagrian monastic tradition: the ascetic tries to detach himself from attractions to sensible things, and to concentrate his inner and outer practice on the use of his *mind* for contemplation. But Maximus's point – like Augustine's in *De Trinitate* 14 – is that the mind seeking to contemplate God gradually discovers in its own life and structure a limited, created image of God's infinite and inconceivable life as radically one and irreducibly three. As a creature made in God's image, the human person recognizes the divine Mystery most fully in its awareness of itself.

It is this created likeness, too, this affinity between God and the mind, which lays the foundation in Maximus's thought for the process of transformation in grace, grounded in the Incarnation and in the concrete life of the sacraments, which he characteristically calls *deification*. Throughout his career, Maximus speaks of this as the goal of the life of faith. So in his *Commentary on the Lord's Prayer*, probably dating from early in his time in Carthage [628-630],[21] Maximus describes the goal of the Christian life in these terms:

> When Christ, who has overcome the world, has become our leader, he will fully arm us with the law of the commandments, by which he makes us reject the passions, and thus binds our nature back to itself by love. He sets in movement in us an insatiable desire for himself, who is the Bread of Life, wisdom, knowledge, and justice. When we fulfil the Father's will, he renders us similar to the angels in their adoration, as we imitate them by reflecting the heavenly blessedness in the conduct of our life. From there he leads us finally in the supreme ascent in divine realities to the "Father of lights" (James 1.14),

[19] Sherwood dates the whole set of *Ambigua to John* to 628-638, a broad span of years during Maximus's time in Carthage, but largely before the Christological controversy had fully re-emerged on the imperial and ecclesiastical stage. Janowiak and Booth date them as "early (before c. 633/4), perhaps c. 628?"

[20] Maximus, *Ambiguum* 10 (PG 91.1193d-1196a; translation mine).

[21] Janowiak and Booth date this work simply as "early (before 636)."

> wherein he makes us "sharers in the divine nature" (II Peter 1.4), by participating in the grace of the Spirit, through which we received the title of God's children…[22]

Discipleship, knowledge, virtuous conduct and desire all work together to lead the Christian towards a holiness that really is only understandable as a share in the life and reality of God. And in the *Mystagogy*, which seems to be roughly contemporary with the *Commentary*, Maximus explicitly draws out the Eucharistic underpinning of this process of growth in divine participation:

> By holy communion in the spotless and life-giving Mysteries, we are given fellowship and identity with him [= Christ] by participation in likeness, by which man is deemed worthy from man to become God. For we believe that in this present life we already have a share in these gifts of the Holy Spirit, through the love that is in faith; and in the future age, after we have kept the commandments to the best of our ability, we believe that we shall have a share in them in very truth, in their concrete reality, according to the steadfast hope of our faith and the solid and unchangeable promise to which God has committed himself.[23]

Yet divinization, as participation in the life of the infinite and unknowable God, remains endlessly different from absorption or identity. God remains God, without extension in time or space, while creatures remain multiple and finite, by the very structure of their being *other* than God. The creature's participation in the being of the Creator, rooted in unlikeness, is itself a part of the divine Mystery. So in one of the "Fifteen Chapters" that begin the larger, post-Maximian anthology, *Five Hundred Chapters on the Being of God and the Economy* – a brief, introductory set of aphorisms that Sherwood thinks have a good chance of being authentic fragments of Maximus[24] – the Confessor comments on the paradox of creaturely participation in God:

> The One who exists as essentially beyond participation, but wishes to be participated in in another way by those who are able, never departs at all from his essential hiddenness, since the very way, according to which he allows himself to be participated in, itself remains forever inexplicable to them all. Therefore, just as God willingly lets himself be participated in, in a way known to him, so also he willingly brings into existence participating beings, according to a plan he himself understands, through the overwhelming power of his goodness. Thus what has come to be by the will of the Creator could never be co-eternal with him who has willed it.[25]

If creation is both a relation of dependency and a promise of deeper, saving union, by the grace of Christ, for those who accept that grace in faith, the simplicity of God – as the *source* of all the multiple, divisible being that we know, but as himself *beyond being* – must be presupposed. To be both Creator and Savior of beings who share his existence as a gift, God must simply *be*.

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[22] Maximus, *On the Lord's Prayer* 5 (trans. Berthold, 118).

[23] Maximus, *The Church's Mystagogy* 24 (trans. Berthold, 207).

[24] See *An Annotated Date-list*, no. 37A (pp. 35-36). Sherwood supposes these date from the same early-middle period of Maximus's thought as the *Centuries on Knowledge*: 630-34. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Kosmische Liturgie*, second edition (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1961), 484n5. Janowiak and Booth suggest a "date indeterminable, but perhaps early" (Allen and Neil, *Handbook*, 31).

[25] *Fifteen Chapters*, no. 7 (PG 90.1180C – 1181A; translation mine).

John of Damascus

Writing a century after Maximus, the Palestinian monk John of Damascus apparently enjoyed both a more tranquil historical context than Maximus did, and was blessed with a less polemical temperament. We know little of his career, apart from the fact that he was born in Damascus around 660-675, the son of a Christian financial official in the court of the Muslim caliph, and after a brief time as a bureaucrat himself, migrated to the monastery of St. Sabas, in the Judaean desert, where he spent the rest of his long life, dying around 750. Although he left behind a sizeable corpus of homilies, poems, philosophical definitions, and controversial works, John is mainly known to posterity, both Byzantine and Western, as a learned synthesizer of the earlier Patristic theological tradition: a sharp-witted, judicious, balanced writer, committed to presenting a full and reasonable account of regnant Christian orthodoxy.[26]

John of Damascus unequivocally emphasizes the traditional Christian understanding of God as radically single and simple, a simplicity that in no way conflicts with God's eternal existence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So he begins his confessional summary of the Church's faith, after arguing more generally for God's existence, with a list of divine attributes one might also find in the works of late antique philosophers:

> Therefore we believe in one God: one principle, without beginning, uncreated, unbegotten, indestructible and immortal, eternal, unlimited, uncircumscribed, unbounded, infinite in power, simple, uncompounded, incorporeal, unchanging, unaffected, unchangeable, unalterable, invisible, source of goodness and justice, light intellectual and inaccessible…; one substance, one godhead, one virtue, one will, one operation, one principality, one power, one domination, one kingdom; known in three perfect Persons and adored with one adoration, believed in and worshipped by every rational creature, united without confusion and distinct without separation – which is beyond understanding.[27]

This radical simplicity implies that all the qualities we normally attribute to the Supreme Being are either *negative* qualities, denying that terms we associate with the existence of creatures apply to God, or else affirmations that he is the *cause* of these qualities in creatures. He writes:

> The Divinity is simple and uncompounded. But that which is composed of several different things is compounded. Consequently, should we say that being uncreated, unoriginated, incorporeal, immortal, eternal, good, creative, and the like are essential differences in God, then, since he is composed of so many things, he will not be simple but compounded, which is impious to the last degree. Therefore, one should not suppose that any one of these things which are affirmed of God is indicative of *what he is* in essence. Rather, they show either *what he is not*, or some *relation* to some one of those things that are contrasted with him, or something of those things which are consequential to his nature or operation. Now it seems that of all the names given to God, the more proper is that of *He who is*…[28]

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[26] The best survey of John's life and thought is Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[27] *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 8, in *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, Fathers of the Church 37, trans. Frederic H. Chase, Jr. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 178-79. The thirteenth-century Latin translation of this work by Burgundio of Pisa, which was used by St. Thomas Aquinas and others, divided John's work into four books, corresponding to the divisions of the now-classic *Sentences* of Peter Lombard; originally, however, John's work consisted simply of a "century" or 100 chapters, a principle of organization more familiar from late Patristic religious literature.

[28] Ibid. 9 (trans. Chase, 189 [altered]).

God's radical oneness is true as a kind of ontological foundation, paradoxically, for God's existence as a Trinity of persons:

> And we hold everything belonging to the nature and the essence to be simple, while we recognize the difference of the persons as residing only in the three *properties* of being uncaused and Father, of being caused and Son, and of being caused and proceeding… For although each is subsistent in itself – that is to say, is a perfect Person and has its own manner of existence (τρόπος τῆς ὑπάρξεως) – they are united in their essence and natural properties, and by their not being removed from the Person of the Father; and they are one God, and are so called.[29]

In his treatise *Against the Manichees*, John also uses the analogy of the human consciousness, as Augustine and Maximus had done, to argue that the three distinct hypostases Christians confess in God do not disrupt their substantial oneness of action or being, as a dynamic realization of the divine intellect. The Manichee asks, "What, then? Do not your God and his Son and his Spirit collide (περιπεσοῦνται), when they are in the same place?" John replies:

> Not at all! For I say the Divine is not in any place – it is without quantity and uncircumscribable. Nor are the three hypostases separated from each other; but just as reason (ὁ λόγος), when generated by the mind, does not go forth from it and is not separated from it, but is begotten from it and exists within it, so the Son and the Spirit are from the Father and in him. For the Logos and the Spirit are one substance, and are inseparable hypostases, since they are inseparable powers of his mind... Therefore, even if there are three hypostases, still there is one God – not three! For the mind and its reason and its spirit are one mind, not three minds…[30]

In fact, John of Damascus is the Greek Patristic author responsible for first applying the term περιχώρησις or "circumincession" – a kind of dance-like exchange of positions and qualities in a rhythmic give and take, which had previously been used by Gregory of Nazianzus[31] and Maximus[32] to refer to the unity in distinction of Christ's two natures – to the relationships of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in God. He writes:

> We do not call the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit three gods, but rather one God, the Holy Triad; we refer this to the one cause of the Son and the Spirit, but do not compound them or blend them together by a Sabellian contraction. For they are unified, as we have said already, not in such a way as to be confused, but so as to cling to each other; and they have this interpenetration (περιχώρησις) with each other without any trace of

[29] Ibid. 49 (trans. Chase, 277). I have argued elsewhere that a number of important Greek Patristic authors define the individual or hypostasis, over against the more universal category of substance (οὐσία) or nature (φύσις), precisely as the "mode" (τρόπος) in which a universal reality exists concretely, marked off by its individuating and even its accidental characteristics; see Brian E. Daley, S.J., "Nature and the 'Mode of Union': Late Patristic Models for the Personal Unity of Christ," in *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium*, ed. Gerald O'Collins, S.J., Stephen Davis, and Daniel Kendall, S.J. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 164-96; also "Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus on the Trinity," in *The Holy Trinity in the Life of the Church*, ed. Khaled Anatolios (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 79-99, esp. 93-94.

[30] *Against the Manichees* 8.1-15, in *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos* IV, ed. B. Kotter (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969), 355 (translation mine).

[31] Gregory uses the verbal form for the related natures of Christ in *Ep. 101* (To Cledonius 1) 31, in SC 208 (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 48.

[32] See, for example, Maximus, *Dial. with Pyrrhus* (PG 91.308 CD); Opusc. 7 (PG 91.88 A); Opusc. 16 (PG 91.189 D).

> compounding or blending. Yet they are not projected away from each other, or cut apart in their substance, as they are in Arius's division.[33]

One notices in John of Damascus's work, in fact, not only a continuation of the tendency of earlier Christian thinkers to rely on the terminology and conceptual analysis of later Greek philosophy for their discussion of God's being and God's relation to creatures, but also the gradual affirmation of a certain linguistic independence that Christian orthodoxy had begun to produce for itself. What the Church feels compelled to say about the inner being of the triune God echoes or offers a reverse image, in many cases, of what it feels it must say about the person of Christ, as at once human and divine; in the famous phrase of Gregory of Nazianzus, the constitution of Christ is "the opposite of what it is in the Trinity." So John writes:

> Just as the three persons of the Holy Trinity are united without confusion and are distinct without separation, and have number without the number causing division or separation or estrangement or severance among them – for we recognize that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are one God – so in the same way the natures of Christ, although united, are united without confusion, and although mutually immanent, do not suffer any change or transformation of one into the other. For each one keeps its own distinctiveness unchanged.[34]

In his *Dialectica*, a kind of dictionary of philosophical terms used by theologians, John even observes that "secular philosophers" (οἱ ἔξω φιλοσόφοι) tend to distinguish carefully among terms that are quite close in meaning, such as οὐσία (substance or essence) and φύσις (nature), but Christian theologians have developed – for the purposes of dogmatic clarity – a terminology that is sometimes less nuanced, but that serves the purposes of giving expression to faith. So

> The holy Fathers overlook many of these quibbles (ἐρεσχελίας), and have called what is common and predicated of many individuals, or the most universal class (τὸ εἰδικώτατον εἶδος*),* substance or nature or form – such as "angel," "human," "horse"… And the particular thing they call "individual" and "person" and "hypostasis" – such as Peter or Paul… It is impossible for two hypostases not to differ from each other in accidents when they differ from each other in number. And one must realize that [what we call] characteristic properties are the accidental features that mark off the concrete individual thing.[35]

Theology is not primarily concerned with maintaining philosophical exactitude, in other words; but as it attempts to do justice to what God has revealed in history – specifically, as it struggles to give voice to the Mystery of salvation in Christ, and to the understanding of God and the world that our salvation implies – it readily makes use of philosophical language for its own needs.

Some Conclusions

1. All theology, strictly speaking, is "language about God," or at least deals, as Thomas Aquinas says, with "all things under the aspect of God."[36] But in speaking about God, humans are

[33] *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 8 (ed. Kotter, II, 29.259-265) (translation mine).
[34] Ibid. 49 (trans. Chase, 278). See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ep. 101* (To Cledonius 1) 21, in SC 208, 44.
[35] *Dialectica* 31(ed. Kotter, 1.94-95) (translation mine).
[36] *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 7.

deliberately using language to speak about the unspeakable, to talk about a being who is, by definition, not part of the ordinary world of our reference. What we mean by *God*, most faithful people agree, is the One in whom *all reality is grounded*, the *norm* for judging truth and beauty and goodness, the *source* of the whole universe of events and objects that we call "the world." Everything else that is, the religious person believes, *is* because of its relationship to God. God, by contrast, has *no* prior cause or norm. God just *is*. So – because God is not a *part* of reality but its presupposition – we must always speak about God with mental reservations. Our language must be "bent" to be applied to him.

2. Speaking about God's "simplicity," then, is really a way of reminding ourselves of that special use of our language when we do speak of him. It is not "natural theology," if that means an attempt to demonstrate God's existence or qualities through philosophical reflection; it is a way of affirming our need for a different "grammar" of linguistic reference when speaking of God – of saying from the start that God, however we have come to know and think of God, is not just a part of the world, but transcends the world and ordinary experience. Reflections on divine simplicity, in Thomas Aquinas's terminology, are not part of "sacred doctrine" – what God has revealed of himself in history, to Israel, in Jesus, and by the Holy Spirit – but are part of the *praeambula fidei*: what one must keep in mind when hearing and speaking the language of faith.
3. We know God, understandably, through our human experience of, and reflection on, the world. We know God as *cause* through all the things that are caused; we speak of God by means of *images* derived from the world we directly encounter. As Christians confessing a God who is radically one and irreducibly threefold, many theologians – including Augustine, Maximus and John of Damascus in the early Church – have spoken of God by analogy with our experience of our *conscious selves*. In knowing ourselves as unitary spiritual beings, who live in a world of many other beings and who realize our conscious life as subjects in a variety of activities and functions, we form distant images of what God may be like.
4. Christians base their normative understanding of God, and of "all things under the aspect of God," however, on their *faith in Jesus*, who died and rose again, as God's Word made flesh, God's own Son in human form. Jesus, as God's ultimate revealer, determines our conceptions of God. It is to be expected, then, that classical Christian language about the Mystery of God should be intimately related to classical language about the Mystery of Christ's person. We learn of God through Christ. So distinguishing what is human and what is divine in Christ, in the concrete subjectivity of the single agent or person who is our Savior, draws the believing community to reflect on what is characteristic of the divine or of creatures, what constitutes our individual identity, and how individuals may "possess" – or exist in – substances or natures.
5. The ancient controversies about the person of Christ began from the assumption that he is the divine Savior, the one who has accomplished for humanity what only God can do, yet did it as one who lived in our midst. He was generally confessed to be "Emmanuel – God with us" (Matt. 1:23). Yet in the doctrinal discussions of the fourth and fifth centuries, it became clear that mainstream Christians did not want to affirm that Christ is simply a unique kind of hybrid: a blend of the divine and the human who is neither, because he combines both into a new *kind* of being. Approaches to Christ that implied this – whether the model of the Apollinarians in the late fourth century, or that of the "monenergists" and "monothelites" in the mid-seventh – were ultimately rejected by mainstream Christians because they clearly compromised both the way we understand full humanity and the way we understand God.
6. In fact, it has been plausibly argued that the real concern of the so-called "School of Antioch" in the late fourth and early fifth centuries – Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia,

Nestorius, Theodoret of Cyrus – was not so much to underline the full, normal humanity of Jesus (as Grillmeier and other writers on ancient Christology have supposed) as to safeguard the transcendence of God, as that was commonly understood in the Greek religious world.[37] If a clear conceptual line is not drawn between God's being and the activities of the human world, they asked – if we permit titles like *Theotokos* for Mary – do we not risk conceiving of the Divine as a piece of creation? Do we not risk lapsing into mythology? So God's *otherness*, God's inconceivability and freedom from circumscription, came to be emphasized more and more, as we have seen, not only by the Antiochenes, but by the later defenders of the Chalcedonian, two-nature, two-operation, two-will Christology. To maintain the balance and paradox of the orthodox understanding of Christ, it was clearly necessary to think of God – even God the Son, God present in the "composite hypostasis" of Christ – as *not* bound by all the characteristics of created beings. The Son, as God, must be substantially or naturally *other* than the man from Nazareth in fundamentally important ways: infinitely other in his substance, in *what* he is as God, even though he and Jesus are *personally* one – one conscious, acting subject, one divine *who*.

7. Central to this notion of God's transcendence – God's otherness by supereminence, as later Western theologians might say – is the notion of his *simplicity*. To be the foundation of beings in the world, without *being* such a being, God must be free of all divisibility and multiplicity, whether material or conceptual. In his own reality, at least, God must be thought of as unnameable, inconceivable, without end or beginning. God must be thought of as the ground of all that is, but not as *part* of all that is, or as being *like* anything that is. God must simply *be*.

So to the modern question of whether divine simplicity is "a necessary doctrine," it seems to me the classical writers of the early Church, East and West, would feel compelled to answer: of course! If God is not simple, God is not transcendent, and so God is not God. How this divine simplicity is to be understood, or at least affirmed without contradicting the other central Christian affirmation – based on the Scriptures, and based on our experience of Christ and of the Spirit's presence in the life of the post-Pentecost Church – that God *is* always Father and Son and Holy Spirit, remained for these Fathers one of the central conceptual and spiritual challenges of Christian life and worship, and remains so still. But this is the paradox in which Christians live, the paradox that points us beyond ourselves to the God who is other than creation, and who alone saves us.

[37] See especially Silke-Petra Bergjan, *Theodoret von Cyrus und der Neunizänismus* (De Gruyter: Berlin, 1993); Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 161-212; John J. O'Keefe, "Impassible Suffering? Divine Passion and Fifth-Century Christology," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 39-60.