

Society for Ecumenical Studies

Calvinus Catholicus et Ecumenicus

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John Calvin: Catholic and Ecumenical? Reformed, Catholic & Orthodox Perspectives

A Reflection from Orthodoxy

Father Maximus Lavriotes, is an independent theologian and writer. The following is a summary of his talk on The Roots of Christian Mysticism, “ The Theology of the later Byzantine Fathers from the 7th -14th century”, given at the London Christian Meditation Centre, St Mark's, Clerkenwell, 26 April 2005.

The occasion for the West's divide – whether it is over Augustine and Calvin, or between Catholic and Protestant, or between Medieval and Modern - is not something that registers greatly within Orthodoxy. In the Orthodox Church, Augustine is honoured as one of the Fathers, but his teaching is not seen as a defining achievement in the same way as it is in the Latin tradition, to which both Catholics and Protestants belong. As one of the Fathers, his writings have a standing proper to one of the Church's saints; his feast is kept on June 15th. But, as with many of the other Fathers, his teaching is seen and weighed in the context of the whole tradition, not just in terms of his significance and contribution within the tradition. So tradition has a tendency to provide a balance or a counterweight where it is found that something in one instance is overstated, or inadequate or needs to be developed. In some cases, this may even amount to correction.

In the case of St Augustine, the Orthodox Church believes that what become the great questions for the West - of works, grace, faith and

justification, anthropology, human nature, the fall, salvation – were already settled at the Sixth Ecumenical Council in 680-1, which condemned the heresy of Monothelism, and answered the question of what will was at work in Christ. Behind the controversy lay different views in East and West on what a human will is and the role humanity thus has in salvation, especially the will of Christ himself, human and divine. In effect the Council, which forms part of the doctrine of both East and West, adopted a position different from Augustine's and actually went further than Pelagius. As such, the Council vindicated the standpoint of St Maximus the Confessor, and it is the development and expression of his teaching – and how it was furthered by St Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century – that we explore now, by way of reflection on where the West would arrive in the sixteenth and the teaching of John Calvin.

Maximus the Confessor

Maximus was born about 590. He came to prominence in the seventh century. Regarded as one of the most important Church Fathers of the Eastern Christian - Byzantine tradition.

Background-influences

The beginnings of the Eastern theological tradition can be traced back to Alexandria in the very first centuries after Christ. By the latter part of 5th century Proclus' pupil Ammonius, the son of Hermeias, transformed under duress the pagan "Neoplatonic" School of Science (focused on the study of Aristotle) into a "Christian" School of Science. His most distinguished pupil became John the Grammarian. (Ammonius' Philosophical School had nothing to do with what western scholars have dubbed "the great Christian Catechetical School" founded by Pantaenus, the teacher of Clement). The Byzantine Emperor Justinian had shown respect for Ammonius' School and unlike the Athenian spared the Alexandrian School from closure in 529-though yet not fully christianized.

The greatest figure in Alexandria just before Maximus was John the Grammarian (known as John Philoponus). He published a treatise

“Against Proclus on the eternity of the world” and shortly after that another *“Against Aristotle”* in both of which he showed a serious error in Aristotle. Aristotle up to then had been regarded as infallible especially in physics. Aristotle denied the possibility of infinitude regarding the Cosmos but at the same time accepted the eternity of time and consequently of the world. How could something eternal be not infinite? John Philoponus became a Christian (Monophysite) and got embroiled in the theological debates of his time.

Gap between East and West

Already in the 2nd century Irenaeus who came from Asia Minor to the West to become Bishop of Lyons, has proven himself the real founder of Eastern theological tradition, which became under Athanasius a School of theological Realism – by adopting a typically Alexandrian interpretation of Aristotle. Irenaeus tried to bridge the gap between the East and West with regard to the date of calculating Easter. (It became custom since the 4th century the date of Easter to be announced each year from Alexandria, the astronomical centre of the empire, using astronomical tables). Irenaeus also attempted to defeat the many dualistic forms of Christianity (Docetism, Gnostics, Marcionism) mostly influenced by the Platonic distinctions between matter and Spirit, (or body and soul and the derogatory attitude adopted towards the former); but dualism survived and flourished after Irenaeus’ death (202) in other forms such as the Manicheans (Augustine had been a Manichean before becoming a Catholic). The tendency to dualism had very serious repercussions for the fate and destiny of Western Christianity.

Maximus became head of the christianized School of Science but fled Alexandria when the city was invaded by Islamic hordes in 642 becoming a monk in Rome. Being the most eminent scientist of his time he produced the first permanent tables for finding the Easter Day and the Yom Kippur Day (still then fervently observed according to the Jewish calendar by Christians until its transformation into the Exaltation of the Cross Day on September 14 in 629AD) basing his

calculations on observations on the circles of the moon. He then established the Alexandrian interpretation of Aristotle's *Physics* as the theological instrument *par excellence* for understanding the Cosmos and human nature in particular. His all-essential axiom that *necessity* is incompatible with *nature* and thus freedom is a *natural property* of every nature (of the Divine and human natures in particular), became the backbone of Eastern Theology and opened up a gap between the Eastern and Western Empires both doctrinally and in practical matters.

Maximus was also influenced by the Cappadocians (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus). They adhered to the very same realistic principles established by the Alexandrian tradition through Irenaeus and Athanasius but also, at least in Basil's case, made use of the scientific revisions which were then taking place.

Maximus, a man ahead of his time

Maximus was the greatest scientist within seven Christian centuries! He perceived the general relativity theory as well as the evolution of species through natural selection "*from the most general genera down to the most specific species*". He established that there was no eternal matter which pre-existed (as the Platonists and Origenists believed). He became very accurate in asseverating that God's infinitude together with **all** properties of the Divine Nature is communicable to man. He also introduced the principle of ceaseless evolution in the study of the universe by suggesting that all created nature has the ability to expand and contract on end. He urged that all species evolve and eventually become extinct though we don't gather how the latter occurs precisely from his writings. He also contended there were no constants in physics: *Nothing that is created can be immutable*. (This means that Einstein was wrong to assume that the speed of light is a constant and contemporary astrophysicists have demonstrated his error). He also contributed to the unification theory, [That is, how can the fundamental forces in nature become one (gravity, electromagnetism, weak and strong interactions)] by accepting the Stoic axiom (already adopted by the Alexandrian School) that human

will, expressed as desire and motion, is a fundamental force in the universe!

Maximus' understanding of Christology

Aristotle's understanding of good and evil as equal forces prevailed in Alexandrian thought up until the time of John Philoponus. According to Aristotle evil and good eternally existed with equal force. Humans were equally inclined to good or evil...

Christian theologians tended to examine the humanity of Christ; in order to establish that he was fully human he had to be in possession of all inclinations that humans display throughout their lives and if so, theologians had to accept that Christ was equally inclined to good and evil. Maximus overturned this theory. He suggested that goodness was granted to us by nature and that evil was non-being - having never been created by God and thus by no means integral element of any nature. We therefore have to abuse our own will to make evil happen (which Christ was unable to do since both of his natural wills were of their own accord in natural harmony with both of his natures), yet in our very nature we still remain virtuous even while abusing it – no abuse whatsoever can distort God's creation! We don't have to import virtue in from outside as Aristotle said. We just have to get rid of lust and all other unnatural by-products of willfully abused natural energy in order to allow our inalienable natural goodness to shine properly. The purification of our own nature became the ideal of the monastic life. This is of paramount significance because Christ's human nature is the embodiment of original goodness. This had serious implications for understanding human life and reality.

Maximus' Anthropology

Maximus' Anthropology is purely Pelagian which proves that Pelagius himself borrowed his views from the School of Alexandria. But St. Maximus went much further than Pelagius by declaring that God has created man self-sufficient to cause his own salvation through Christ's humanity by simply enacting his natural and innate salvific capacity!

There are three human states of being:

- 1) Life contrary to nature (fallen beings, human life as the majority of us know it)
- 2) Life According to nature (the Christian life attained by purification of all abuses of the will)
- 3) Life beyond nature (to which we can only be elevated by God's uncreated activity)

So we fallen human beings can only activate our inner natural splendour but God must intervene to raise us above created nature and make us uncreated by grace.

Life in the fallen state

Our fallen state is a state of self-division and confusion without any real damage, defect or distortion of what the Creator originally made in His Image and Likeness and therefore there is only one single image to which humanity amounts. The fall caused that this unique image seems as if smashed into smithereens; so mankind exists in a fragmentary state of being according to Maximus because the one image is split. Reunification at the natural level has to do with restoring what belongs to nature (and therefore what pertains only to the one natural will, active in all humans). As long as individuality (occurring as a multiplicity of **persons**) prevails over nature there is an unnatural situation allowing for selfish abuses of the one will we all share in common. It is a kind of feebleness, a digression from what the common will naturally intends. In this case the will follows the interests of each particular individual no matter how destructive to human nature or detrimental to the rest of the society these interests are. This abusive function of **personal** willfulness is defined by Maximus as Gnostic Will. Gnostic Will is a potential for strictly personal laxity in sticking to what nature dictates to rational creatures, but not a natural capacity of these creatures. Christ's true humanity was totally deprived of gnostic will as **He has never become a human person despite His incarnation. Hence His ultimately sinless humanity and incapacity to "choose" sin (no nature whatsoever has been created by God with a capacity to sin). Had the Creator ever granted to any nature the proneness to sin, He would have proven Himself the very author of evil...**

Life in the natural state

It is impossible for anyone to make a choice-unless their will acts in its gnostic or personal capacity-because every nature has been created choice-less. Any natural will expresses the spontaneity of nature itself which knows at any time what to do. Thinking (imagination in particular) is set in motion in our fallen state only. Intellectual thinking is unnecessary for people restored in their natural state. The activity of the intellect is a negative factor in the spiritual life. At state 2, meditation or contemplation is pointless (at state 1 it is strictly prohibited!). The great ideal of Eastern monasticism is to cease the function of the intellect completely in order to arrive at real Union with God in this life - this is very close to Buddhist ideals - by invoking the uncreated power of God –the only One who can elevate us to a real and unmediated Union with Himself. Once we are in state 2, all human virtue is completely activated. Everyone here is extremely active in virtue. He loses his own “self” or personality and thinks only of others and of the common good.

Life in the supernatural - uncreated state

In state 3, there is absolute passivity- as human beings are being completely overwhelmed by God. This state will prevail in the life to come but here and now purified people we may get glimpses of it.

Maximus’ understanding of Salvation

Maximus gives an extraordinary definition of Christ as *the One with whom **all** rational creatures shall inevitably unite*. Thus the divine motive for salvation of the world precedes its creation. God is therefore never risking anything! He is not going to lose a single human being. There are two possible images of ultimate and everlasting Union with Christ: either by grace (saints) or contrary to grace (sinners), but **all** will be equally united with Him for evermore. Christ will treat both sides equally. This is the plan God had in mind when he saved the world before creating it. Maximus’ God never gets himself in a mess! (as if faced by a “sudden” fall or sin of man...) It is very important to notice that human beings have no natural capacity whatsoever to do anything sinful or evil. They can though

abuse their natural will and then act as **persons** through gnostic will in order to achieve wrongdoing. Conversely, all have natural capacity for their own salvation; for spontaneous acts of charity, gratitude and prayer. They are not in such a defective state that they can't help themselves without "spiritual" help from outside from the Church or other human beings...In fact human beings do not really need such help at all, providing that they remain within the realm of their own nature and they never violate their natural will.

In state 3 God imparts all his divine attributes without exception to these people but not his own essence. This is what "deification" means- partaking of the divine attributes without losing any human attributes. "*Out of his ultimate goodness he turns everything human into himself.*" This famous expression by Maximus describes state 3. According to the Western scholastic tradition it is not possible to attain this state of ultimate Union with God neither in this life nor in the life to come. The dualism that Irenaeus fought against was successfully overcome in the East but not in the West. *Humanity* or *Adam* (in Hebrew) literally means the one made of clay. God assumes humanity *thus making Adam so much God, as much Himself became clay*. You do not lose your created status in state 3 but everything is transformed.

Gregory Palamas

Gregory was a follower of Maximus in the fourteenth century. He was a compiler. He was not an original. He intended to be a monk living in solitude elevating himself to the natural state and expecting elevation from God, but an unusual thing happened.

He came from a very noble family. His father was a member of the royal council of the emperor. He was found praying during council and dismissed. Gregory was very distinguished at school. He wrote an essay on Aristotle. His professor said that Aristotle himself would have approved. The Scholastics associated necessity with nature so even God had to exist and act out of necessity. Gregory, like

Maximus and the Cappadocians, associated nature with freedom. Gregory came to Mount Athos to become a monk.

Another Greek monk arrived from Calabria in Southern Italy well versed in scholasticism and an Augustinian. He began suggesting things that were prominent in the West but alien to Byzantine tradition. For example monks in the East closed their eyes and placed their chin on their chest as they said the Jesus prayer. He wrote with irony that if they were naked they would be navel gazing! He said that whatever is inferior to intellect has to be dismissed as he believed that the cardinal sin of man was his ignorance of scientific truth and thus salvation could come only through research and intellectual activity. He however misunderstood the term “ignorance”. The Desert Fathers had said that the fall led to a state of ignorance of God, a confusion which doesn’t allow the eye of the soul be illumined by God. In the West ignorance was understood as lack of knowledge therefore quite early the western monks left the cloister and headed for the schoolroom. The only way to get rid of sin in their view was to learn.

The monk newly arrived from Calabria discovered that the monks on Mount Athos did not favour learning and began to question Gregory to try and entrap him into admitting that ignorance of science was an obstacle to salvation. In the dialogue between the two monks completely different understandings about divine revelation, salvation and human nature emerged. The western monk said everything material was contemptible. He was confident that the only way a human could get in touch with God was through ecstasy and intellect; to get out of the body and the passivity of sentiments to find God. The Hesychast movement in the East was based on ridding the intellect of all concepts. This is what the monks in the desert had been striving to do. Gregory said how can I get in touch with God without being in love with him? And how can I love him without allowing the passive faculty of the soul and the body become actively sensuous rather than mortified for the sake of the intellect? (The soul according to Aristotle had three parts of which the highest was the intellect.) Apparently all Western mystics attempted to mortify the lower parts whereas Eastern monks suggested that if God were to make contact with humanity it

must be with the whole of man. According to the Scholastics God was pure essence therefore he was completely inaccessible to man. But in the East God has attributes as well as essence. For the West this poses the problem of how God can retain his simplicity and not be said to be composite. The Scholastics say that God is *Actus Purus*: pure actuality. The real problem in the West is the incommunicableness of God. Tackling this problem made Gregory Palamas into a great theologian. He took his arguments from his predecessors especially Maximus and used it to challenge Scholasticism in an effective way. This was a difficult period in the history of the Byzantine Empire which was collapsing. Its fall was a matter of time. But at another level people were turning to God in droves. The kingdom of God was seen as something within humanity (Luk.17:21) rather than of the world. Most of the male population was turning to monastic life and in fact this was one of the reasons for the fall of the Empire, there were not enough men left to fight.

There followed three general councils at Constantinople at which the Emperor John Cantakouzenos presented a list of questions. The first was the question of whether there really was a distinction between God's essence and his attributes which might threaten the idea of God's simplicity. The West remained unable to accept that humans can move into the divine sphere and a Papal encyclical in 1943 still insisted that to assert that humans could take on divine attributes was blasphemous. Meister Eckhart is one of the few Western mystics who did declare it was possible for God and Man to become one and he is still regarded as a heretic.

Final points to note - it is interesting to note the despair on the face of Christ on the cross in the western art of the middle ages-a sign of complete separation between God and humanity; and with regard to the incarnation of God note the differences between the East and West: For the East the incarnation of God means he becomes even more hidden-not revealed! He manifests again himself in glory after his resurrection to all those who are pure in heart to see Him.

It should be regarded as a source of consolation that the common destiny of humanity has already been safeguarded: Christ is determined to claim all his baggage!