

SYSTEMATIC REFLECTIONS 2

The Christological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor

Ambigua 6-10 to John

PROLOGUE

Acquiring “a state of mind receptive to the mystical knowledge of God” is a requisite for a bishop. Our mind must be brought to attain the heights attained by Gregory. Necessarily this will mean that our reflection of these will be far more discursive.

AMBIGUA 6

Gregory, “On Love for the Poor”: “I show [my body] consideration as my coworker, but have no means of fleeing its rebellion, or of not falling away from God, being weighed down by its bonds dragging me down or binding me to the earth.”

Dragging down and bonding seem unnecessarily repetitive.

- This is address to all humanity as subject.
- The pursuit of salvation is found in practice and contemplation.
- We are simplified by uniting our will with God’s, bringing the irrational in intimate union with the rational part of ourselves.
- The Word appears obscurely in the sensible world; we can glimpse him in beings. This world is like being in a womb.
- The deifying state of the mind is a habit that must be maintained lest we be drawn back into the captivation by the material world.
- Love for the body (improper love) becomes a bond to the soul who wishes to leap.
- Dragging down refers, then, to the danger for one engaged in contemplation and binding to the one engaged in practice.

AMBIGUA 7

Gregory, “On Love for the Poor”: “What is this wisdom that concerns me? And what is this great mystery? Or is it God’s will that we, who are a portion of God that has flowed down from above, not become exalted and lifted up on account of this dignity, and so despise our Creator? Or is it not rather that, in our struggle and battle with the body, we should always look to Him, so that this very weakness that has been yoked to us might be an education concerning our dignity?”

It seems to suggest Origen’s error that we existed before we were bodily and that bodies are a punishment for sin.

- God is immovable; creatures are in motion.
- We are not at rest until our desires are fulfilled.
- An original fall from blessedness does not make sense, since it is blessedness that we seek.
- The Beautiful is that which is good and desirable in itself. An original fall means that it was not the fulfillment of desire.
- It would also mean that evil was the path to the good.
- It would mean that evil is more beneficial than nature in leading us to the good.
- All things move in a linear, circular, or spiral manner; movement depends on coming into being.

- Created beings cannot be moved from an original rest. They are in motion until they find their rest.
- Only God can grant impassibility and completeness (immobility). They must be moved to well-being, yet this is also in accord with their will.
 - "I am not implying the destruction of our power of self-determination, but rather affirming our fixed and unchangeable natural disposition, that is, a voluntary surrender of the will .. so that henceforth it has neither the inclination nor the ability to be carried elsewhere"
- All desire will be engulfed in God's deifying energy.
- Knowing will become the joy of participation.
- The being of each creature is a participation in God according to their capacity.
 - Its desire is to be joined to God and nothing else
- We have failed to move in accordance with our logos
- We will reach a state of satisfaction.

AMBIGUA 8

Gregory, "On Love for the Poor": "For as long as matter carries within itself disorder, as if in a flowing stream."

It seems that matter is said to be the cause of disorder.

- This refers to the choice of finding one's satisfaction in matter rather than in intellectual beauty.
- Humanity became "oblivious of God".
- Matter was either made corrupted or created that way in foreknowledge of sin.
- In grace, matter becomes the means for healing.
- The disorder mentioned is corruption and changeableness.

AMBIGUA 9

Gregory, "Oration on Saint Athanasius": "For it has nothing higher, nor will it ever have."

This means that God beyond all beings and beyond all affirmation.

AMBIGUA 10

Gregory, "Oration on Saint Athanasius": "To whomsoever it has been granted to pass, by means of reason and contemplation, through matter and this fleshly 'cloud' or 'veil' (whichever it should be called), and attain kinship with God, and be mingled with the purest light (to the extent that this is possible for human nature)—that person is blessed owing to his ascent from here and his divinization there, which is given by true philosophy and by passing beyond the material dyad on account of the unity perceived in the Trinity."

Indicates contemplation as utilizing matter as the starting point to participation in God. The blessed life is called philosophical. The limits of human nature set the boundaries.

- The knowledge of things is possible through ascetic struggle
"He who acquires comprehension devoutly through contemplation, it is as if he possessed reality, with a rational will defining the reason of things accurately and correctly, keeping the judgment for himself, or rather keeping himself unimpaired in judgment." (Louth, 98)

PRINCIPLES OF REVELATION

- "For they say that God and man are paradigms of one another, that as much as God is humanized to man through love for mankind, so much is man able to be deified to God through love, and that as much as man is caught up by God to what is known in his mind, so

much does man manifest God, who is invisible by nature, through the virtues." (Amb 10.3; Louth 101)

- Adam Cooper calls this passage "a virtual *locus classicus* on the reciprocal relationship between divine incarnation and human deification" (Cooper 2001, 161)
- "By this philosophy consisting of both reason and contemplation, according to which the nature of the body is necessarily ennobled, the Saints, turning unerringly with a yearning for God, worthily draw near to God through natural reflections of the divine indwelling in them, holding apart body and the world in ascetic struggle, beholding these things that contain each other, the one by nature, the other by perceiving it, and subordinating the one to the other, by such properties according to which one fits into the other, neither of them, by its own nature, being free from circumscription, and leading what is shameful in the soul to be corrected and circumscribed by the mortal and circumscribed, while binding indissolubly the immortal and ever-moving to the only immortal God, who transcends every infinity, in no way surrendering to the contrary motions of the world and the flesh. This is the fullness of all virtue and knowledge, indeed I would say that it is its end." (10.3, continuing the above; Louth 101)
- "Those who have been drawn into the closest possible relationship to God, and through understanding of Him have born the fruit of blessedness, and are turned towards themselves alone and God, have completely withdrawn from the bonds of practical activity and matter by a sincere breaking with material relationships, and adapted themselves to contemplation and to God." (Amb 10; Louth 99)
- Knowledge of God is unhindered in the virtuous
 - Ascetic struggle is essential to the rational contemplation of God
- "So again Moses followed God who called him, and, passing beyond everything here below, entered into the cloud, where God was, that is, into the formless, invisible and bodiless state, with a mind free from any relationship to anything other than God." (10.5; Louth 103)
- "Having come into this state, in so far as human nature is worthy of it, [Moses] receives, as a worthy prize for that blessed ascent, knowledge encompassing the genesis of time and nature, and, having made God Himself the type and paradigm of the virtues, he modeled himself on Him, like a picture preserving beautifully the copy of the archetype, and came down the mountain. Because of his participation in glory, his face shown with grace to all men, so that having himself become a figure of the Godlike figure, he gave and displayed without envy, and he did this by expounding to the people what he had seen and heard, and handing on to those with him in writing the mysteries of God as a kind of divinely-given inheritance." (10.5; Louth, 103)

Does the attainment of virtue require the renunciation of the world?

- "Therefore, they say, they remain changeless, no longer having any relationship with the material. For one who is ruled by matter necessarily comes to change in a way contrary to nature along with matter which is itself naturally changeable." (10; Louth, 99) would suggest possibly so, but the next section refers to the cloud and veil of Gregory as not flesh itself but the passion which attaches to the flesh.
- The final answer seems more qualified, with an unquestionable affirmation of matter: "The Saints therefore know that the soul, when it is moved contrary to nature through the means of flesh towards matter, is clothed in an earthly form, but when, in contrast, it is moved naturally by means of the soul towards God, they are disposed to adapt the flesh in a seemly way to God, through the ascetic practice of the virtues adorning [the soul], as far as possible, with divine splendors." (10; Louth, 100)

THE DARKNESS OF GOD IN THE HEIGHTS OF REVELATION

- "And they passed over from flesh to spirit, before they had put aside this fleshly life, by the change in their powers of sense that the Spirit worked in them, lifting the veils of the passions

from the intellectual activity that was in them. Then, having both their bodily and spiritual senses purified, they were taught the spiritual meanings [*logoi*] of the mysteries that were shown to them." (10.17; Louth, 109)

- "They were taught hiddenly that the all-blessed radiance that shone resplendently from his face, as it overpowered the sight of the eyes, was a symbol of His divinity that transcends mind and sense and being and knowledge. He had neither form nor beauty, but they knew him as the Word become flesh, and thus were led to regard him as fair with beauty beyond the sons of men, and to understand that He is the One who was in the beginning, and was with God, and was God, and through a theological denial that praises Him as being completely uncontained, they were led contemplatively to the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." (10.17; Louth, 109; continuing from the previous)
- "Thus they arrived at a clear and correct understanding concerning God, and were set free from every attachment to the world and the flesh." (10.17; Louth, 109)

CONTEMPLATING THE WORLD

- The world becomes revelation through the Logos: "It is precisely as, or because material creation is 'caught up' as an object of potential union with the Logos that its role as a medium of divine revelation becomes possible." (Cooper 2001, 171)
- "In a noble manner, by these [motions] [the Fathers] pass beyond this present age of trials in accordance with the true and immutable form of [each] natural motion, so that they make sense, which possesses the spiritual reasons of things perceived through the senses, ascend by means of reason up to mind, and, in a singular way, they unite reason, which possesses the meanings of beings, to mind in accordance with one, simple and undivided sagacity. Thus they raise the mind, freed and pure of any motion around any existing thing and at rest in its own natural activity, to God, so that in this way it is wholly gathered to God, and made wholly worthy through the Spirit of being united with the whole Godhead, for it bears the whole image of the heavenly, so far as is humanly possible, and draws down the divine splendor to such a degree, if it is permitted to say this, that it is drawn to God and united with Him." (Amb 10; Louth 101)
- "But if, however, the Saints are moved by visions of beings, they are not moved, as with us, in a material way principally to behold and know those things, but in order to praise in many ways God, who is and appears through all things and in all things, and to gather together for themselves every capacity for wonder and reason for glorifying." (Amb 10; Louth 101)
- His reflection on Psalm 19 reaches the same conclusion: creation can be a conduit for theological understanding (Amb 10.10; Louth 105)
- It is within the world that the presence of a good God can be known (Cooper 2001, 163, referring to Amb 7)
- The world stands as a source of revelation in a sense parallel to the Scriptures. Cooper quotes Paul Blowers to say that Maximus "envisions creation and scripture as objective economies of divine revelation that stand in a perfect analogous relation to the Logos-Revealer." (Cooper 2001, 171, citing Blowers, 102)
- Maximus refers to the divine life as "reason's gift" indicating the power of reason to lift the mind to the contemplation of the divine (10.16; Louth, 108)
- "For in both cases what is said is accommodated to the meaning, so that in both cases it can be veiled from us because of its obscurity, lest we dare unworthily to apply it to what is beyond comprehension, whether, in the case of the written Holy Scripture, to the One revealed as the Word or, in the case of creation, to the One revealed as Creator and maker and fashioner. Whence in both cases I think it necessarily follows that anyone who wishes may live an upright and blameless life with God, whether through scriptural understanding in the Spirit, or through the natural contemplation of reality in accordance with the Spirit. So the two laws – both the natural law and the written law – are of equal honor and teach the same things; neither is greater or less

than the other, which shows, as is right, that the lover of perfect wisdom may become the one who desires wisdom perfectly." (10.17; Louth, 109-10)

- The purpose of allegorical meditation
 - The Word is "thickened in syllables and letters to be perceived by us" (10.18; Louth, 111)
- "The beauty of creatures, if it is not referred to the glory of the Maker, naturally defrauds of rational reverence those who behold it." (10.18; Louth 111)
- By contemplating nature, the person begins to participate in God: "The man who forms himself in accordance with these becomes God, experiencing what God is from the things that are, as it were seeing with his mind the complete impression of God in accordance with goodness, and forming himself after this most limpidly with his reason." (10.19, Louth, 113)
- "Being becomes the teacher of theology" reaching God as the cause of all (10.19; Louth, 113)

REVELATION IS A SCHOOL FOR CONTEMPLATION AND PROGRESSES IN STAGES

- The saints do not contemplate as beginners do, according to images, "but solely by the mind, rendered most pure and released from all material mists." (10.30; Louth, 128)

THE INCARNATE LOGOS

Maximus's meditation on the Transfiguration shows the Logos as the summit of knowledge

- "For He accepted to be unchangeably created in form like us and through his immeasurable love for humankind to become the type and symbol of Himself, and from Himself symbolically to represent Himself, and through the manifestation of Himself to lead to Himself in His complete and secret hiddenness the whole creation, and while He remains quite unknown in his hidden, secret place beyond all thing, unable to be known or understood by any being in any way whatever, out of his love for humankind he grants to human beings intimations of Himself in the manifest divine works performed in the flesh." (10.31c; Louth, 132)
- "The Word is familiar thanks to a twofold knowledge of things divine. One is relative, resting only on reason and concepts, and, furthermore, does not possess in actuated form the perception, by experience, of what is known. With this kind of knowledge we are furnished in the present life. The other, assuredly veracious, consists purely in experience in act, without reason or concepts, and it gains in an integral fashion the perception of what is known, through grace, by participation. By way of this kind of knowledge we shall, in the future rest, receive that supernatural divinization whose operation never comes to an end." (*Quaes. Thal.* 60; trans. in Nichols, 29-30)
- "The light from the face of the Lord, therefore, conquers the human blessedness of the apostles by a hidden apophatic theology. According to this [light], the blessed and holy Godhead is by essence beyond ineffability and unknowability and countlessly raised above all infinity, leaving not the slightest trace of comprehension to those who are after it [sc. the Godhead], nor disclosing any idea to any being as to how and how far the same is both monad and triad, since the uncreated is not naturally contained by creation, nor is the unlimited comprehended by what is limited." (10.31d, 1068A-B, Louth, 132-33)

GOD REMOVED FROM THE WORLD

- "Thus when we say that the divine is, we do not say how it is. And therefore we say of him that 'he is' and 'he was' simply and boundlessly and absolutely. For the divine cannot be grasped by any reason or thought, nor do we grasp his being when we say that he is. For being is derived from him but he is not being. For he is beyond being itself, and beyond anything that is said or conceived of him, whether simply or in a certain way." (10.38, trans. Louth 139)
- Maximus contrasts the monad which is simple and infinite with the dyad which is multiple and finite: "For the dyad could be neither infinite, nor without beginning, nor unmoved, nor the beginning of anything at all, for it is circumscribed by unity since it has existence as the

composition of monads, which it contains as parts, and into which it can be divided as parts...” (10.40, trans. Louth 141)

- He continues that philosophically we can reach the idea of the monad, unmoved, without division, simple. This, however, is not God in himself. The Godhead is “infinitely inaccessible in every kind of way to mind or reason or name and completely unapproachable.” The monad is, rather “a sound definition of our faith in [the Godhead], accessible to us and within our reach.” (10.41, trans. Louth, 142-143).

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