

Maximus as a philosophical interpreter of Dionysius: the case of Christ as manic lover

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Exegesis¹ has always been a part not only of theology,² but also of philosophy.³ The example of late Neoplatonists, such as Proclus, with their meticulous Commentaries on several Platonic dialogues, as well as Aristotelian works, is perspicuous.⁴ These works serve to us nowadays not only as interpretive proposals for reading Plato, but as sources for unearthing the philosophy of the commentators themselves. Nevertheless, grappling with the exegesis of a great thinker's works is not special to philosophers of the Platonist tradition alone, but actually is a phenomenon characteristic of all the ancient philosophical schools,⁵ as D. Sedley has shown.⁶ Moreover, recently G. Karamanolis has convincingly argued that at least the early Christian Fathers he is interested in can form another school of philosophy along the traditional ones of Platonism, Aris-

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1. Alternatively: hermeneutics or interpretation of scriptures.

2. If we take, for instance, Origen's Commentary on the *Canticum Canticorum* as a first and foremost theological enterprise.

3. If we want to maintain a sharp division between theology and philosophy, something that is, alas, the topic of another article or monograph.

4. See for example Proclus' Commentaries on Plato's *Republic*. Even Plotinus, the first official Neoplatonist, although not having written actual commentaries, in many places of his work engages in close exegesis of Platonic passages. A good example is the *Symposium*'s genealogy of Eros interpreted by Plotinus in *Enn.* III.5.[50], §§5-9.

5. See for instance the case of the great Aristotelian philosopher and commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias.

6. DAVID SEDLEY, "Philosophical Allegiance in the Greco-Roman World," in *Philosophia Togata I. Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society*, ed. Miriam Griffin and Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), passim and 97. Each proponent of a school was trying to give the most "faithful" interpretation of the school-founder's thought.

totelism, Stoicism, Epicureanism and Skepticism.⁷ One potential problem with Karamanolis' view though is that he believes that the dogmas of the Synods of the Church may have changed this philosophical character of early Christianity. A simple answer to this challenge, drawing on Karamanolis' own observations,⁸ is that if the Synods acquired an authority close to that of Holy Scripture, they did not, at least immediately, settle the doctrinal disagreements of various Christians. Moreover, Christian fathers had to think a lot, engage in multifarious interpretive enterprises and argue about the correctness of a (dogmatic) thesis so that it can be acknowledged as orthodoxy.⁹ The case of Maximus the Confessor¹⁰ leaps first to mind.¹¹

In what follows I will not examine, though, any particular aspect of Maximus' exegesis of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite,¹² another authority of the ancient

7. See GEORGE KARAMANOLIS, *The Philosophy of Early Christianity* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 159, esp. 24.

8. Cf. *ibid.*, e.g. 9.

9. However, although another topic for a different paper, the concept of dogma as traditionally, and especially in Western scholarship, understood, is distanced from the Eastern orthodox understanding, where dogma denotes the delimitation of the experience of the Church. Cf. also ΧΡΗΣΤΟΣ ΓΙΑΝΝΑΡΑΣ, *Τὸ Αἴνιγμα τοῦ κακοῦ* (Ἀθήνα: Ἰκαρος, 2008) 175-187, esp. 175-177. See also *ibid.*, 250-254. [There exists an English translation of the book: CHRISTOS YANNARAS, *The Enigma of Evil*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Press, 2012).] With specific reference to Maximus the Confessor's hermeneutics of the ecclesial experience see PAUL M. BLOWERS, "The Interpretive Dance: Concealment, Disclosure and Defferral of Meaning in Maximus the Confessor's Hermeneutical Theology", in *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through the Resurrection. Proceedings of the Symposium on St Maximus the Confessor. Belgrade, October 8-21, 2012*, ed. Bishop Maxim (Vasiljević) (Alhambra, California: Sebastian Press, 2013), 259.

10. Apart from the already expanded Maximian bibliography, two recent publications are excellent guides to the study of Maximus: *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, eds. Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford: OUP, 2015) and Paul M. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor. Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: OUP, 2016).

11. Consider how the conflicts giving rise to the 4th Ecumenical Synod against monophysitism continued to exist so that they make the 6th Ecum. Council (against monothelism and monenergism), which used Maximus' theology of double natural energy and will in Christ, necessary. (Unfortunately Maximus the Confessor did not survive to see his rehabilitation.)

12. JOHN PANTELEIMON MANOUSSAKIS, "The Revelation of the Phenomena and the Phenomena of Revelation: An Apology for Dionysius' Phenomenological Appropriation," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 82:4 (2008): 705, n.1 proposes that we should rather be speaking of the pseudo-Areopagite, since Dionysius can be a monk's name.

Church greatly admired by Maximus.¹³ If famously all the history of philosophy has been footnotes to Plato,¹⁴ this has not always been done in the form of actual commentary. Rather, thinkers have been consciously or unconsciously wrestling with the problems and world-views one may detect in Platonic dialogues, and as a result they have produced their own distinct philosophical positions.¹⁵ In this sense of philosophical qua hermeneutical encounter with the past¹⁶ I will be preoccupied in what follows. More specifically I will focus on one aspect of Maximus' encounter with Dionysius. This is the issue of manic love as exhibited in the eschatological mystery of Christ, who according to Maximus is the end of the whole creation. True, Maximus deals with love and problems arising from Dionysius' enunciations in many other places,¹⁷ but I will concentrate only on one fairly well-known passage, which at first sight would not seem to betray any Dionysian connection or antecedent.

Let us be reminded of Maximus' excerpts I have in mind: "...This is the great and hidden mystery, at once the blessed end for which all things are ordained. It is the divine purpose conceived before the beginning of created beings. In defining it we would say that this mystery is the preconceived goal for which everything exists, but which itself exists on account of nothing. With a clear view to this end, God created the essences of created beings, and such is, properly

13. Despite the long tradition reflected in Migne's *PG*, and followed even today in some modern editions-translations, like the one of Σωτήρης Γουνελάς, trans. [into Modern Greek], ΔΙΟΝΥΣΙΟΥ ΑΡΕΟΠΑΓΙΤΟΥ, *Περί μυστικῆς θεολογίας*, intro. Vladimir Lossky, Athens: Ἀγκυράς, 2002, 63 and 41 (note), most of the Commentary on Dionysius' works attributed to Maximus the Confessor was in fact written by John of Scythopolis. Cf. also ANDREW LOUTH, "St. Denys the Areopagite and St. Maximus the Confessor: a Question of Influence," *Studia Patristica* 27 (1993): 166-167 with references (in nn.1 and 2) to the groundwork of HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Cosmic Liturgy. The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, Communio, 2003), 359-387 (: Appendix initially published in 1940), as well as the more recent study of BEATA REGINA SUCHLA, *Die sogenannten Maximus-Scholien des Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagiticum* (Göttingen: Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, philol.-hist. Kl. 3, 1980).

14. Cf. ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology. The Gifford Lectures delivered in the University of Edinburgh during the session 1927-28* (Cambridge: CUP, 1929), 63.

15. The beginning was already with Plato's disciple, Aristotle.

16. See also HANS-GEORG GADAMER, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), e.g. 244-264.

17. See for instance his *De char.* and the relevant sections from *Amb.* respectively.

speaking, the terminus of his providence and of the things under his providential care. Inasmuch as it leads to God, it is the recapitulation of the things he has created... For the union between a limit of the ages and limitlessness, between measure and immeasurability, between finitude and infinity, between Creator and creation, between rest and motion, was conceived before the ages. This union has been manifested in Christ at the end of time, ...”¹⁸

Having been reminded of Maximus’ Christocentric worldview¹⁹ let us now go back to Dionysius and the chapters on Eros from the *Divine Names* (§§4.10-17). In the famous section about erotic ecstasy (§4.13)²⁰ Dionysius concludes by calling God «ζηλωτής» (zealous),²¹ i.e. a manic lover, of His beloved cosmos. This manic love is expressed within the unending erotic dialogue of the pair of lovers, i.e. God and the creation. One serious interpretive problem, though, is that Dionysius does not connect manic love with Christ’s incarnation. In contrast, for Maximus, as is evident from the passage cited above, the ultimate expression of God’s love is Christ’s kenotic incarnation: the Uncreated God not only created the cosmos, but finally assumed in Himself the created nature of His beloved. But what are the actual bonds between the two philosophical Church Fathers?

18. *Ad Thal.*, 60, esp. ll.33-40 and 51-55 (Laga and Steel-vol.2); the English is by Paul M. Blowers and Robert L. Wilken trans., *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ. Selected Writings from St Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 123-129, esp.124 and 125.

19. See also the extensive book-length study by TORSTEIN T. TOLLEFSEN, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

20. For Maximus’ elaborations on the Dionysian theme of love as ecstasy see NIKOLAOS LOUDOVIKOS, *A Eucharistic Ontology. Maximus the Confessor’s Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity*, trans. Elizabeth Theokritoff (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010), 172-177. I have not been able to verify the claim of JOHN D. ZIZIOULAS, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 91 that Maximus transfers Dionysius’ notion of ecstasy with respect to the God-cosmos relation to God’s trinitarian being. What is more, *ibid.*, in n.74 he refers to POLYCARP SHERWOOD, introduction to *The Ascetic Life. The Four Centuries on Charity*, by St. Maximus the Confessor, trans. and annot. Polycarp Sherwood (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press / London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1955), 32, although it seems to me that the page-reference is wrong, and perhaps should be replaced with 43.

21. Not envious («φθονερός») of course, as in HERODOTUS, *Hist.*,3.40,6-7; cf. *ibid.*,1.32,5-6. See *DN*,4.13,159,14-18 (Suchla)/712B (PG). For the scriptural basis see e.g. Exodus, 20:5 and 30:14 with further references in the critical edition’s upper apparatus of BEATA R. SUCHLA, *Corpus Dionysiaca*, vol.I, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De Divinis Nominibus* (Berlin, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), ad loc.

The status of Dionysian Christology is much as with his Trinitarian theology: it exists, but it is not developed.²² Moreover, explicit reference to Christ (that is, not only about the incarnation) is absent from Dionysius' section on Eros. Fr Meyendorff writes that "[u]ndoubtedly, Dionysius... mentions the name of Jesus Christ and professes his belief in the incarnation, but the structure of his system is perfectly independent of his profession of faith."²³ While I believe that we had better look at other Fathers, like Maximus,²⁴ if we wanted a full-fledged and well-worked out Christology,²⁵ I am more optimistic than the Palamite scholar, and hold that Maximus' Christological views might hint at Christ's traces in Dionysius' corpus in order to complete the Dionysian picture of love.

22. The most extensive and enlightening Dionysian reference to Christ in *DN* forms a supposed quotation from Dionysius' «καθηγεμών», Hierotheus' *Θεολογικαὶ Στοιχειώσεις* (a title suspiciously similar with Proclus' *Elements of Theology*), and figures as ch.§2.10. In its first part Hierotheus/Dionysius exclaim Christ's divinity (*DN*,134,7-135,1/648C-648D), while incarnation and the paradoxical conjunction of full divinity and full humanity are extolled in the second part (*ibid.*,135,2-9/648D-649A). It is ironic that the «θεανδρική ἐνέργεια» of Dionysius' *Epistle* 4.(1),19/1072C has been taken to suggest "monenergism", although Maximus the Confessor, the champion of Christ's double activity and will, did not do so. Cf. JAROSLAV PELIKAN, "The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality", in PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, foreword, notes and trans. collaboration Paul Rorem (NY, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 19-21, and the commentators' perplexity noted by PAUL ROREM, *Pseudo-Dionysius. A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (NY, Oxford: OUP, 1993), 9-11.

23. JOHN MEYENDORFF, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, trans. Yves Dubois (Washington, DC: Corpus Books, 1969), 81. So, for instance, when in the penultimate chapter (IV) of the *Mystical Theology* Dionysius stresses that the ineffable God transcends every perceptual category, we might wonder why he does not allude to Christ. Apart from the specific aims of the treatise, a response might be that he is thinking in terms of Christ's resurrected («καινόν») body, and this might underlie Maximus' thought infra, in my n.38. On the other hand, Dionysius' scholiast does not allude to Christ either (in 197C, *PG*, vol.4, commenting on *DN*,1.4,114,6), although Christ is in the context few lines below (*ibid.*,114,7-11, esp. 1.8)!

24. See e.g. JAROSLAV PELIKAN, introduction to *Selected Writings*, by Maximus Confessor, trans. George C. Berthold (NY, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 7: "...Maximus explained the language of Dionysius in such a manner that he achieved the Trinitarian and Christocentric reorientation of the Dionysian system and thus rehabilitated it." Some lines below Pelikan speaks of Maximus' "Trinitarian Christocentrism". See also *ibid.*,6.

25. ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΣ ΛΟΥΔΟΒΙΚΟΣ, *Ψυχανάλυση και Ορθόδοξη Θεολογία. Περί επιθυμίας, καθολικότητας και εσχολογίας* (Athens: Ἄρμός, 2003), esp. the first essay (15-42), as well as passim in the "Concluding Summary" (in English, 103-114), forms an example of how such a Christology can be of an aid to the psychoanalyst.

For one thing, in contrast to the discussion of Trinity in Dionysius, which although pivotal is not explicitly connected with eros, almost every time that the Areopagite refers to Christ, he connects Him with love by extolling His «φιλανθρωπία»²⁶ (“love for mankind”).²⁷ Admittedly, love is here denoted by «φιλία» rather than ἔρως (or ἀγάπη).²⁸ Still, Dionysius is here referring to God’s manic love for mankind, which leads to His self-emptiness («κένωσις»)²⁹ and results in the incarnation. If we ask why the incarnation, the paradigm instantiation of theophany, should take place, the most succinct Patristic answer has been given by Athanasius the Great and is echoed by Maximus in his *Commentary on the Our Father*: “He became man so that we be made God”.³⁰ The Trini-

26. On the precedents of this word in Plato and Proclus’ *Commentary on the First Alcibiades* see DIMITRIOS A. VASILAKIS, *Neoplatonic Love: The Metaphysics of Eros in Plotinus, Proclus and the Pseudo-Dionysius*. PhD Thesis in Philosophy (London: King’s College, 2014), 117, n.83. For a succinct archaeology of the word in Stoicism, Middle Platonism, Clement of Alexandria and Origen see Catherine Osborne, *Eros unveiled. Plato and the God of Love* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 171-176, with relevant bibliography in n.24 (:171-172); see also nn.45 and 48 in 177 and 178 respectively. For the use in Gregory of Nyssa see JONATHAN M. RIST, “A Note on Eros and Agape in Pseudo-Dionysius,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966), 237-238.

27. See already the first appearance of Christ in *DN*, where the «φιλάνθρωπον» is ascribed to the Trinity “because in one of its persons it accepted a true share (ἐκοινωνήσεν) of what it is we are, and thereby issued a call to man’s lowly state to rise up to it [sc. the Divine Trinity]” (cf. *DN*,1.4,113,6-9/592A). Other instances and in varying contexts are: *ibid.*,1.4,114,3/592B; 2.6,130,9-10/644C; *ibid.*,130,8-9; 2.3,125,21-126,2/640C; 6.2,191,16/856D; *Epistle* 8.4,15/1093D and 21-22/1096A. In Maximus (and in similar contexts) the notion (and word) of «φιλανθρωπία» appears very frequently, especially in *Ad Thal.*, e.g. 21, 36 and 54, 215.

28. Apart from the philosophical preexistence of the word «φιλανθρωπία» noted above (n.26), and the rareness of Greek compounds with the word ἀγάπη or ἔρως («παιδεραστία» being an exception), the issue is like with «φιλοσοφία»: although we do not do this in the case of the noun, we describe philosophers as lovers (ἐρασταί) e.g. of truth. See the formula «ἀληθείας... ἐρασταί» in *DN*,1.5,117,8/593C. Maximus speaks of every «νοῦς μυστικῆς γενόμενος ἐραστῆς θεολογίας» in *Ad Thal.*, 25, 105-106. (A TLG-search of the lemma «ἐραστής» in Maximus’ works renders only 5 results in total, each of them from a different treatise.)

29. There is a sole reference to “self-emptiness” («κένωσεως»: *DN*,135,6/649A; cf. Paul, Phil.2:7) in the whole Dionysian corpus. On the other hand, there are no more than ten instances in Maximus’ works; see e.g. his *Ambigua ad Thomam*, 3, 45 (Janssens). For the importance of kenosis in orthodox Christian theology, spiritual life and asceticism see NICHOLAS V. SAKHAROV, *I love, therefore I am: the Theological Legacy of Archimandrite Sophrony* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), pp.93116.

30. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *De incarnatione verbi*, 54.3.1-2 (Kannengiesser): «αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηνθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν». It is echoed by Maximus in *Or. Dom.*, 41-43,

tarian God's providential, descending and ecstatic eros leads not only to the unification of the cosmos in itself, but implants an indissoluble bond between God and creation. The erotic effects of this unification are so strong that the "zealous" God becomes a God-Man. Hence, it is only with Christ in mind (and heart) that one can understand Dionysius' erotic image of the circle, to which I want to draw our attention in relation to Maximus.

For our purposes I will not invoke the long and complicated passage from *DN*, §4.14, but I will turn to the equivalent but briefer ch.4.17, which is supposed to be the last quotation from Dionysius' teacher, Hierotheus:³¹ "Come, let us gather all these [sc. instances of eros: on God's and on cosmos' behalf]³² once more together into a unity and let us say that there is a simple self-moving power directing all things to mingle as one, that it starts out from the Good, reaches down to the lowliest of the beings, returns (ἀνακυκλοῦσα) then in due order through all the stages back to the Good, and thus turns (ἀνελιπτομένη) from itself and through itself and upon itself and towards itself in an everlasting circle."³³

We need to keep in mind that when the erotic force that has proceeded from God returns from the level of creation, it bears the seal of both the divine and the created. Thus, the best exemplification of this return is Christ, who is literally both divine and a created human being. This reading, supported by Dionysius' abovementioned insistence on Christ's 'love for mankind', can complete the picture of the erotic cycle and ultimately acquits him from any pantheistic accusations. More importantly for us, it explains and anticipates Maximus' aforementioned view that the end of God's overflowing creation is the person of Jesus.³⁴ What is more, if we follow Maximus further, we can note that Christ's

(including in the formula the word «κένωσιν»), as is noted in MAXIMUS CONFESSOR, *Selected Writings*, trans. and notes George C. Berthold (NY, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1985), 120, n.9. Cf. also a similar Dionysian remark in the initial chapters of *DN*:1.4,113,6-9, cited above in n.27.

31. It is an irony that Dionysius' work is supposed to serve as the unfolding of Hierotheus' condensed teaching. Cf. *DN*,3.2,140,6-16, esp. ll.6-10.

32. See *ibid.*, §§4:15 and 16.

33. *DN*,4.17,162,1-5/713D. ('Circle' in the translation is derived from the context.) The English is taken from PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, foreword, notes and tran. collaboration by Paul Rorem. NY, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987.

34. See also ΑΘΑΝΑΣΙΟΣ Β. ΒΑΕΤΣΗΣ, *Ὀντολογία τῆς πώσης σῆ θεολογία Μαξίμου τοῦ Ὁμολογητοῦ*. Doctoral Dissertation (Θεσσαλονίκη: Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, 1994), 237-249, esp. 243-245. This is an optimistic view quite different from the one presupposed

manic φιλανθρωπία should not be conceived as an exclusive love for man as opposed to the cosmos, but as the consummation of God's love for His total creation, because the microcosm of human being encompasses in itself both the spiritual (e.g. angelic) and the material (e.g. soulless) creation.³⁵

Thus, this plausible reading can unveil the Maximian centrality of Christ in Dionysius' erotic universe, and invites us to connect ecstasy with Christ's kenosis-incarnation, seeing the latter as species and perfection of the former,³⁶ even if Dionysius does not explicitly do so.³⁷ But this is precisely what we find in interpretations of Dionysius by later Fathers. Hence, authors like Maximus and Gregory Palamas³⁸ do not impose a "Christological corrective" on Dionysius,³⁹ but rather can be seen as developing insights implicitly present in his writings.⁴⁰ To sum up, owing to Maximus, Dionysius' extant exclamations of Christ's 'self-emptying' φιλανθρωπία, as well as the image of the circle, can provide, for the

and envisaged by OSBORNE, *Eros unveiled*, 196-199, although elsewhere (*ibid.*,25-26) she seems to be coming close to Maximian eschatological perspectives.

35. Contra Osborne, *Eros unveiled*, 197. Cf. ANDREW LOUTH, "The Cosmic Vision of Saint Maximos the Confessor," in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, eds. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacock (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 192, who gives a helpful diagram. Hence, because man is the coronation of demiurgy, the possibility of "transfiguration" is granted to the entire cosmos.

36. Due to her contemporary theological agenda, which is selective in that she challenges Process Theology and J. Moltmann, my suggestion is denied by Osborne, *Eros unveiled*, 198 and 195; cf. also 186-189.

37. For an answer as to why Dionysius avoids mentioning Christ in the section of Eros in *DN* see DIMITRIOS A. VASILAKIS, *Neoplatonic Love*, 244-247.

38. See also ANDREW LOUTH, "The reception of Dionysius in the Byzantine world: Maximus to Palamas," *Modern Theology* 24:4 (2008), 590-593 and 595-598 respectively. For instance, Louth emphasizes Maximus' usage of Dionysian apophatic and kataphatic theology with specific regard to Christ (*ibid.*,590-591), and mentions Palamas' concern with the issue of angelic mediation, since after the Incarnation man does not necessarily need intermediaries in his communion with God (see *ibid.*,597).

39. Cf. the convincing study by HIEROMONK ALEXANDER (GOLITZIN), "Dionysius Areopagites in the Works of Saint Gregory Palamas: On the Question of a 'Christological Corrective' and Related Matters", *Scrinium* III (2007), esp. 86, 93, 97, 98 (n. 51) and 102. Golitzin, one of the best interpreters of Dionysius today, approaches the issue from many angles and shows that Dionysius forms an integral part of the Eastern hesychastic chain that leads (at least) up to Palamas (through Maximus the Confessor).

40. With LOUTH, "The reception of Dionysius," 591, pace Meyendorff; (cf. also *ibid.*,590 and n.14 in 598).

systematic reasons I explained before, the ultimate proof of and the most adequate explanation for understanding why Dionysius concludes his treatment of erotic ‘ecstasy’ by calling God «ζηλωτής», i.e. a manic lover of His «καλή λίαν»⁴¹ creation.⁴²

Having said so I would not like to present Dionysius as a Maximus avant la lettre, or, on the other hand, Maximus as a dull and unimaginative reader of Dionysius.⁴³ Rather I want to give a good example of the fruitful encounter of a thinker, whether philosopher or theologian, with his/her past, a hermeneutical engagement which is endemic in the field of (the history of) philosophy, too.⁴⁴ The Dionysian characteristics about love that I presented may have prompted Maximus to think hard and shift the emphasis where he would like to. But perhaps the issue of innovation should not worry us. The ecclesial experience as participation in Christ is one and the same in every time; the future enlightens the past and the past foreshadows the future. However, it needs renewed incarnation in at least the linguistic garment of every historical phase.⁴⁵ Moreover, as

41. Cf. Gen.1:31.

42. In other words in the above exposition I have given a Maximian reading of Dionysius, or better I have shown an aspect of and a reason as to why Maximus could find background for his insights in Dionysius. This makes Maximus both a dynamic reader of Dionysius and a brilliant thinker. Thus, without fear of anachronism Maximus can appear as a useful tool in approaching Dionysius (and vice versa).

43. For example an interpretive problem and discrepancy here might be that Dionysius speaks of an “everlasting circle”, which perhaps is at odds with Maximus, since the Incarnation is one and is a present sign of the future to come (the ἔσχατα) within a linear conception of History. However, that opposition is not so clear cut as is shown in KATELIS VIGLAS, “The Pair Movement-Rest in Plotinus and Maximus the Confessor,” *Theandros. An Online Journal of Orthodox Christian Theology and Philosophy* 3:2 (2005-2006: Winter), accessed October 08, 2014, http://porphyrius.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/http_www-theandros-com_motionrest.pdf. Besides, this ‘everlasting circle’ might be conveying what Maximus would call “ever-moving repose” for which see SOTIRIS MITRALEXIS, *Ever-moving Repose. The Notion of Time in Maximus the Confessor’s Philosophy through the Perspective of a Relational Ontology*. Doctoral Dissertation (Berlin: Freie Universität, 2014), 139-238, esp. 215-234 and 235-238.

44. True, what would one say about Thomas Aquinas’ *Commentary on the DN*? Does it belong to philosophy or theology or both?

45. Cf. also ΛΑΜΠΡΟΣ ΧΡ. ΣΙΑΣΟΣ, *Ερασιές της Αλήθειας. Έρευνα στις αφετηρίες και στη συγκρότηση της θεολογικής γνωσιολογίας κατά τον Πρόκλο και το Διονύσιο Αρεοπαγίτη*. Doctoral dissertation (Θεσσαλονίκη: Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, 1984), 209, n.412, with reference to the distinction between essence and energies.

Maximus might have put it, even if evident in the ‘dogmas’ of the Church with the aid of the Fathers in Holy Spirit, the ecclesial being awaits Christ in the End to meet and understand its fulfillment⁴⁶.

Abstract

This paper aims to give an example of the fruitful encounter of a thinker, whether philosopher or theologian, with his/her past, a hermeneutical engagement which is endemic in the history of philosophy among other fields. The thinkers in question are Maximus the Confessor and pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, while the study-case is love (eros). In the sections about divine eros in the *Divine Names* (§§4.10-17), (ps.)-Dionysius does not make any reference to the incarnation due to Christ’s philanthropy. On the other hand, Maximus, an admirer of Dionysius, in his famous excerpt from *Ad Thalassium* (60) speaks of Christ as the end of creation, whence scholars speak of a “Christological corrective” of Dionysius on behalf of Maximus. In my exposition, drawing on Dionysius’ extant exclamations of Christ’s ‘self-emptying’ (kenotic) love for mankind (φιλανθρωπία) in other places of his work, as well as on the Neoplatonising image of the circle (from *DN*, §4.14 and 17), I show how Maximus’ Christocentric world-view is not alien to Dionysius’ universe. Hence, the Maximian centrality of Christ can provide the ultimate proof of and the most adequate explanation for understanding why Dionysius concludes his treatment of erotic ‘ecstasy’ (in *DN*, §4.13) by calling God «ζηλωτής» (zealous), i.e. a manic lover of His creation. Such a Maximian reading of Dionysius explains why Maximus could have found background for his insights in Dionysius and makes the former both a dynamic reader of Dionysius, as well as a brilliant thinker. Thus, Dionysius is not reduced to a Maximus avant la lettre, or the latter to an unimaginative reader of the former. Rather, without fear of anachronism and in spite of modern scholarship’s verdicts, Maximus’ work can appear as a useful tool in approaching Dionysius (and vice versa).

46. cf. 1 John 3:2.