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## **Maximus and Irigaray: Metaphysics and Difference**

One's theology is substantially shaped by the metaphysical presuppositions that one brings to the task. So when a particular metaphysics is no longer tenable, this will have implications for the theologies built upon such foundations. It is with regards to this question that I found myself drawn to compare the work of Maximus the Confessor with that of the contemporary French philosopher Luce Irigaray. Both thinkers have sought to overcome the excesses of the philosophical system that they have nonetheless attempted to salvage for their own particular projects. For Irigaray, the system in question was Hegel's dialectics, which she finds to be an invaluable resource for the constitution of a genuinely dialogical culture. For Maximus, the system was Christian Neoplatonism.

Hegel ascribes otherness to the very essence of subjectivity to the extent that alterity is itself constitutive of the freedom of the subject. Self-consciousness is for Hegel essentially a return from out of otherness. The only way to genuinely avoid solipsism is to find a way of truly recognising the other. The question mark over Hegel's thought concerns not the role of the other so much as the appropriation of the other to the same. Does the other remain other or is it ultimately a victim of the march of history on the road to Absolute Spirit? Irigaray is also intrigued by Hegel as "the only Western philosopher to have approached the question of love as labour".<sup>1</sup>

One of the problems with Hegel is that he begins with the idea of the family as an undifferentiated and natural unit. And so Irigaray rehabilitates Hegel through the idea of sexual difference. "Sexual difference", Irigaray argues, "is probably the issue of our time which could be our 'salvation' if we thought it through."<sup>2</sup> Sexual difference is important for establishing a genuinely dialogical culture as opposed to one that is founded upon an abstract universal – usually read as male – subject.

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<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You. Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, Eng. trans. by A. Martin (New York-London 1996) 19.

<sup>2</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Eng. trans. by C. Burke and G. Gill (Ithaca, NY 1993) 5.

Society begins with the couple, but not in the sense that many have argued as a natural immediacy. The family is not an undifferentiated unit. Love is labour, requiring negotiation and dialogue, mediation and transcendence. According to Irigaray:

The absence of any dialogue within the couple . . . perverts the spirit of the individual, of the family, of the race. The concrete, which Hegel seeks in the individual, has its sexual dimension cut away. The individual is already abstract. This abstractness forces us to think of the family as an undifferentiated substance and not as the place of individuation, or spiritual differentiation that can only occur if there is some polemic between the sexes.<sup>3</sup>

Irigaray's argument for an ethics of sexual difference has been welcomed by some admirers of the work of John Paul II as a bulwark against those feminist theologians who have sought to minimise sexual differences in favour of sexual equality. Fergus Kerr suggests that "The strange affinity between Irigaray's metaphors and the gender symbolism of recent papal thinking certainly isolates the equal rights feminism of a self-styled 'liberal' Catholic like [Elizabeth] Schüssler Fiorenza."<sup>4</sup> However, Irigaray distances herself from John Paul II's theology of the family, describing certain elements of his work as the "inheritance of a rather naïve paganism".<sup>5</sup> By this Irigaray means to say that there is a lack of historical consciousness in John Paul's thought on this question, and a presumption that the ideal state of affairs is simply given in nature, that it is sacred because it is natural.

It is not the reduction of the family to its natural dimension that can assure it a future but a cultivation of the union between man and woman in the respect for their differences, which implies that nature becomes consciousness.<sup>6</sup>

Charles Curran has also observed that when it comes to the family John Paul considers the moral law to be outside of the processes of history.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, Eng. trans. by G. Gill (New York 1993) 137; and "In the bosom of the family, man drowns in an ocean of primitive undifferentiation. He can regain his individuality only when he leaves the family" (140).

<sup>4</sup> F. Kerr OP, "Discipleship of Equals or Nuptial Mystery?", *New Blackfriars* 74 (July/August 1994) 354.

<sup>5</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West. From Singularity to Community*, Eng. trans. by S. Pluháček (New York 2002) 118.

<sup>6</sup> Irigaray, *Between East and West*, 118.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul considers the moral law to be outside of the processes of history: "What is known as 'the law of gradualness' or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with 'gradualness of

In theory, *Familiaris consortio* gives more importance to historicity and historical-mindedness than any other document written by John Paul II on the subject of marriage and sexuality. But in reality, historical consciousness does not affect the basic teaching.<sup>8</sup>

This same pattern of apparent acknowledgement but *de facto* denial is also evident in John Paul's own argument that anatomy is in fact destiny. John Paul recognises that to restrict women to biology is problematic to the extent that it would go "hand in hand with a materialistic concept of the human being". John Paul II attempts to evade this materialistic conception by linking motherhood "*to the personal structure of the person and to the personal dimension of the gift*".<sup>9</sup> When it comes to women, however, this personal dimension of the gift turns out to have a biological basis after all. According to John Paul II,

Of course, God entrusts every human being to each other and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way – precisely by reason of their femininity – and this in a particular way determines their vocation.<sup>10</sup>

For Irigaray, however, the meaning and significance of sexual difference is not something established in the beginning as some norm to which we should comply. Rather it shows the way forward, inviting us to become co-creators in a manner that goes beyond simply procreation, which would be simply to reduce creation to its material basis. Irigaray's insistence upon the priority of sexual difference is, in a sense, strategic. How can we approach the question of the other without considering the most basic of differences by which human society is structured?<sup>11</sup> Sexual difference then is exemplary of all difference. But to define the other by their biological difference is both to deny the other as an independent source of self understanding and to put obstacles on the path to the spiritualisation of matter, to deny that the flesh might become word.

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the law'," *Familiaris consortio* 35, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html) (17 October 2005).

<sup>8</sup> C.E. Curran, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II* (Washington 2005) 198-199.

<sup>9</sup> *Mulieris dignitatem* 18, in John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston 1997) 469. Italics in original.

<sup>10</sup> *Mulieris dignitatem* 30, 486.

<sup>11</sup> Irigaray describes her first theoretical task as extricating "the two from the one, the two from the many, the other from the same . . . suspending the authority of the One": Luce Irigaray, "The Question of the Other", Eng. trans. by N. Guynn, *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995) 12.

Irigaray is not an essentialist. For Irigaray, transcendence is only possible if we are cognisant of our natural limitations. Anatomy is not destiny, but it is the condition of possibility for any possible transcendence. According to Irigaray, “The relation between women and men thus renounces natural instinct. Flesh itself becomes spiritual while remaining flesh: affect becomes spirit while remaining love.”<sup>12</sup> The work of incarnation, Irigaray argues,

is realized between nature and culture without forsaking one pole to the advantage of the other. At the subjective and objective level, it is accomplished thanks to the labour of and between *I* and *you*, *he* and *she*, *I<sub>she</sub>* and *you<sub>he</sub>*, *I<sub>he</sub>* and *you<sub>she</sub>*, each irreducible to the other, co-founders of nature and culture.<sup>13</sup>

The work of incarnation, therefore, is a labour of love. Irigaray argues for transcendence and divinisation through mediation, both within the subject and with the other in social relations.

Admittedly, divinisation is for Irigaray a thoroughly Pelagian, even Feuerbachian, exercise, but this is not sufficient grounds for dismissing her program out of hand, anymore than John Paul II’s entire project should be dismissed on account of its shortcomings. Irigaray does Christianity a great service in calling it back to some of its best insights. To respond we need to find orthodox voices from the heart of the Christian tradition that are equal to the challenge. On the face of it, her work has immediate resonances with that of Maximus the Confessor for whom divinisation consists in the mediation of division and difference, a task that was natural to an unfallen humanity but which has been restored in Christ. For Irigaray, difference is something to be preserved and nourished, and not something to be overcome. Indeed, Irigaray would argue that as western culture has been founded upon the hegemony of the one universal subject, difference is something that has yet to be established as a cultural value. Only when difference is given its due will we truly have the beginning of a cultural of life.

## Maximus and Creation

The central Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection of the body lend a dignity to material creation. Not only has God deigned to enter into the process of becoming that is part of creation, but creation itself “will one day

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<sup>12</sup> Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 148.

<sup>13</sup> Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 144.

be subsumed into the fullness of God's self-communication to this material and spiritual cosmos".<sup>14</sup> It is in the task of recovering the place of material creation within salvation history that the contribution of Maximus the Confessor (590 – 662) has become significant. Similarly, John Paul II's concern to recover the place of the body in Christian theology is also laudable, although it is my contention that his neglect of the historicity of the body is a serious shortcoming because it is a neglect of becoming. A great deal of Christian theology has been built upon a neo-platonist foundation in which becoming is considered to be a fall from being. Not only is this problematic in terms of the incarnation and resurrection, but this is also a problem in the light of our current understanding of creation.

Our contemporary understanding of creation, as informed by the scientific world view, sees creation as a process of differentiation and increasing complexity, with this complexity giving rise to emergent phenomena which cannot be reduced to that which went before. Chemistry cannot be reduced to physics, nor biology to chemistry, and so on. The dualism of matter and spirit is overcome in the orientation of matter towards the spirit. According to Rahner,

the development of biologically organised materiality is oriented in terms of an ever increasing complexity and interiority towards spirit, and finally, under the dynamic impulse of God's creative power, and through a process of self-transcendence of this kind, it becomes spirit.<sup>15</sup>

This understanding of creation is consistent with the biblical account of creation through differentiation. Of course the biblical accounts of creation have always been amenable to a plurality of interpretations. But I would contend that neo-platonic Christianity had to perform some impressive theological acrobatics in order to read the biblical accounts according to their own metaphysical presuppositions. Put simply, "becoming" was a problem for neo-platonism.

As Paul Blowers explains, "For Origen the basic scheme was rest (στάσις) followed by movement (κίνησις) away from God that led to 'becoming' (γένεσις), the coming of things into being, i.e. the creation of the world."<sup>16</sup> Creation here is understood as a fall from the original perfection of Being. "For

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, Eng. trans. by W.V. Dych (New York 1994) 445-446.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Rahner, "Christology within an evolutionary view of the world", *Theological Investigations* 5, Eng. trans. by K-H. Kruger (London 1966) 164.

<sup>16</sup> P. Blowers, "Introduction", *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ. Selected Writings from St Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY 2003) 24.

the end', as Origen repeatedly stated, 'is always like the beginning.'"<sup>17</sup> But Maximus observes,

If God can be abandoned once for the sake of experiencing something different, there is nothing to prevent this from happening again and again. If reasonable beings are thus to be carried about and have no place to rest and cannot hope to have any abiding steadfastness in the good, what could be greater reason to despair?<sup>18</sup>

Accordingly, Maximus sets out to correct the errors of Origenism. If becoming is a fall from perfection, then the status of creation itself is under question. However, Maximus understands creation to be an ongoing work of God. "Yet he is still at work, not only preserving these creatures in their very existence but effecting the formation, progress and sustenance of the individual parts that are potential within them."<sup>19</sup>

Another problem for Platonist Christianity is the status of difference which is to be overcome if we are to return to the divine unity. On this point Maximus is a little more ambiguous but most of his contemporary commentators seem to affirm that ultimately Maximus affirms difference. According to Andrew Louth, in Maximus:

the divisions are not done away with, rather they contribute to the multiplicity inevitable in creatures who are 'after God' (as Maximus puts it): from isolating and diminishing, they come to represent the richness and diversity of God's creation.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, as Louth acknowledges, such differences are understood by Maximus hierarchically, whereby we are drawn from the lower to the higher, "towards our final rest in God".<sup>21</sup>

My question is whether this hierarchical understanding of difference really does give difference its proper due. If creation has an intrinsic value and if creation is a process of differentiation, then difference and diversity must also have inherent value derived from the divine initiative, which deserves to be preserved. If we return to the Easter experience that is the source and origin of

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<sup>17</sup> Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London-New York 1996) 66, citing Origen, *De princ.* 2.8.3.

<sup>18</sup> Maximus, *Ambig.* 7; PG 91, 1069C. Eng. trans. by R. Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery*, 46-47.

<sup>19</sup> Maximus, *Ad Thal.* 2; CCSG, 7, 50. Eng. trans. by Blowers, *On the Cosmic Mystery*, 99.

<sup>20</sup> Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 77.

<sup>21</sup> Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 77.

Christian experience we find that the risen Christ, while experienced by the first witnesses to the Resurrection as being in the realm of the divine – in God and of God – was still recognisable as the man they knew. This is significant. His uniqueness was not swallowed up in the great ocean of the divine but preserved. His humanity was not compromised through its identity with God but sublated, raised, exalted to its highest level. Any theology of *theosis* must have its source in this experience. Maximus would seem to agree. Norman Russell argues that,

Maximus is anxious to exclude both a Eutychian fusion of the divine and the human and an Origenistic ascent of the pure intellect to an undifferentiated assimilation to Christ. Deified human beings become god in the same measure that God became man, but although penetrated by divine energy they retain their created human status.<sup>22</sup>

There is, however, some debate on this point. Edward Moore, for example, argues that there is in the theology of Maximus an inherent danger to the eschatological integrity of the person, and that some of his conclusions were:

ultimately fatal to the authentic Christian view of God and humanity as mutual co-operators – a view that Maximus himself seems to espouse in so many parts of his voluminous writings, but clearly contradicts at the highest speculative levels of his thought.<sup>23</sup>

But even if we grant that Maximus does manage to preserve the integrity of the individual in salvation, there is one point upon which Maximus stumbles, and that is the question of sexual difference. Although it is probably unfair and anachronistic to hold Maximus to the bar of such a contemporary concern, the exercise is nonetheless instructive.

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<sup>22</sup> N. Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford 2004) 293-294.

<sup>23</sup> E. Moore, “The Christian Neoplatonism of St. Maximus the Confessor”, *Quodlibet Journal* 6:3 (2004) <http://www.Quodlibet.net>. Moore continues, citing Basil Tatakis who notes that Maximus’ younger contemporary Anastasius of Sinai, “corrected the Maximian notion, arguing that ‘theosis is the ascension toward what is better – it is neither a diminution nor an alteration of nature. In other words, by theosis man will not cease being man; he will simply become perfect man’.” Basil Tatakis, *La philosophie byzantine* (Paris 1949), Eng. trans. by N.J. Moutafakis, *Byzantine Philosophy* (Indianapolis 2003) 67.

## Maximus and Sexual Difference

Maximus shares with Gregory of Nyssa a belief in the double creation of humankind,<sup>24</sup> sexual difference itself being a subsequent creation, instituted in light of the fall. Maximus argues that there would have been another way “for human beings to increase, if the first human being had kept the commandment and not cast himself down to an animal state by abusing his own proper powers”.<sup>25</sup> This reading of the double creation of humanity finds its precedent in Philo of Alexandria. According to Philo, “He that was after the (divine) image was an idea or type or seal, an object of thought (only), incorporeal, neither male nor female, by nature incorruptible.”<sup>26</sup>

For Philo, the essential self is prior to gender, and universal. The division into the sexes as a creative act is secondary and ultimately something to be overcome, if we are to aspire to reflect fully the image of the divine once more. The goal of the spiritual life then is to overcome all those divisions that are intrinsic to the creative process itself. According to Norman Russell, “the human person transcends these divisions one by one in reverse order as it ascends to ever greater levels of unity”.<sup>27</sup> I read this as in fact advocating a process of uncreation according to the neo-platonic model whereby becoming is antithetical to the original divine intention. For Maximus the sin of Adam entailed an abuse of “the natural power of uniting what is divided...so as to separate what is united”.<sup>28</sup>

Maximus apparently falls victim to the same neo-platonic suspicion that differentiation is not so much the work of divine creation as it is of sin. It would seem that Philo’s interpretation of sexual difference as not really being a part of the original divine intention is too much of a temptation for Maximus to resist, and demonstrates that Maximus does indeed have trouble in thinking that difference and becoming have any intrinsic value. But as Adam Cooper argues, holding to the double creation of humankind allows Maximus to “to think of Adam’s fully sensual material incorporation simultaneously as a punitive and an assistive divine act”.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *De opif. hom.* 17.22; PG 44, 189AB-205A.

<sup>25</sup> Maximus, *Ambig. 41*; PG 91, 1309A. Eng. trans. by Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 159.

<sup>26</sup> Philo, *De opif. mund.* 134, in *Philo*, Loeb Classical Library (London 1929) 1,107.

<sup>27</sup> Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 281.

<sup>28</sup> Maximus, *Ambig. 41*; PG 91, 1308C. Eng. trans. by Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 158.

<sup>29</sup> A. Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor: Holy flesh, wholly deified*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford 2005) 80.

Part of the problem in coming to terms with difference is the tension between historical consciousness and the Christian myth of the fall. The myth of the fall posits that the ideal state of affairs was established in the beginning from which humanity deviated. Humanity having perverted creation, it is Christ who re-establishes the original harmony. The idea of redemption as a restoration of lost perfection was an idea beloved by and foundational to the heretical systems of the Gnostics. But the Easter experience at the heart of Christian faith reveals more than a simple restoration. It is, after all, the Risen Christ rather than the pre-lapsarian Adam who constitutes the Christian ideal.

Maximus is aware of this problem but manages to maintain the tension between a hypothetical pre-lapsarian existence and the Christian ideal as a future reality revealed in Christ. “No longer, after the transgression, is the end revealed from the beginning, but the beginning from the end.”<sup>30</sup> It would seem then that the fall means that we can no longer know the beginning. But this is an epistemological rather than ontological correction to the neo-platonic myth. Hence, following Maximus, Cooper argues that, “Considered in themselves, according to their empirical, post-lapsarian constitution, history and cosmos can only be understood punitively.”<sup>31</sup>

Although Maximus preserves the distinction between creation and the fall, the two are in fact contemporaneous. “At the instant he was created, the first man squandered this spiritual capacity – the natural desire of the mind for God – on sensible things.”<sup>32</sup> It would seem to follow from this that sensible things by their very nature attract us away from God, that difference can only detract from unity. But, if the problem with creation is its otherness from God, then the intrinsic value of creation is called into question and otherness is inherently suspect as well. One remedy is to give difference its due, not as an unfortunate by-product of creation, but as part of the essence of creativity itself, having its source in the creative love of the divine Triune community.

## Conclusion

It appears that although Maximus has recognised some of the dangers of Neoplatonism for Christianity, he was unable to free himself entirely from its sway. This should not surprise us given the influence of Neoplatonism on the

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<sup>30</sup> Maximus, *Ad Thal.* 59.280-1, CCG 22, 63. Eng. trans. by Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor*, 83.

<sup>31</sup> Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor*, 252.

<sup>32</sup> Maximus, *Ad Thal.* 61, CCG 22, 85. Eng. trans. by Blowers, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, 131.

warp and weft of Byzantine culture and Christianity. But Christology was not entirely subsumed by Neoplatonism. It retained its otherness. And Maximus by working through the implications of his Christology was able to gain a more critical appraisal of Neoplatonism.

Maximus is often held to be the crowning synthesis of the patristic tradition. But the value of the theology of Maximus the Confessor also lies in showing the way forward in beginning to rethink the metaphysical foundations of the Christian tradition beyond Neoplatonism. Luce Irigaray's advocacy for an ethics of difference also has a valuable contribution to make towards this task. As Mary Collins has observed, "one of the best gifts for the critical mind and for a living tradition is the gift of a new question".<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> M. Collins, *Worship: Renewal to Practice* (Washington, DC 1987) 15.