

“LUCIAN BLAGA” UNIVERSITY OF SIBIU

“ANDREI ŞAGUNA” FACULTY OF

ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

Doctoral Thesis:

“The Nature of Theology in the Thought of Saint Maximus the Confessor”

(Summary)

Scientific Coordinator:

Archdeacon Dr. IOAN I. ICĂ JR, Prof.

Candidate:

Hieromonk NECTARIE (DĂRĂBAN VLAD)

Sibiu

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Summary

Keywords: Orthodox spirituality, Maximus the Confessor, theology, contemplation, asceticism, divinization, biblical hermeneutics, mystical life.

In this research I propose an analysis of the theological discourse of saint Maximus the Confessor (580-662). More precisely, this is an analysis of *Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God*. The starting point of the research was to address the hypothesis stated by the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar that these 200 chapters are a dense formula of the very core of his entire work. In *Introduction* (1.) are presented the reasons why I chose this subject. The first reason is the lack of any serious study dedicated to this Byzantine work since Balthasar's (1961). Second, I try to demonstrate here the essential unity between the theological discourse and the eastern Orthodox spirituality. Those two are reciprocally interlaced. Holding the fact the Maximus the Confessor is one of the most prolific and influent byzantine authors I will argue that the type of theological discourse analyzed here has influenced the entire subsequent theological tradition.

In the *status quaestionis* chapter are enumerated de most prominent studies and monographs dedicated to saint Maximus in the 21st century. On the one hand, we have the papers of the Symposium of Belgrade (2012) which gathered almost all the scholars of saint Maximus (papers published in *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through the Resurrection*, 2013). On the other hand we have the papers from the Symposium of Helsinki (2013) published in the volume *The Architecture of Cosmos* (2015). Finally, at the end of almost a century of research we have the celebrated *Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor* (2015).

The third chapter of the introductive part deals with the dating of the two *Centuries* and their place in the full list of Maximus' works. Regarding the content, those chapters belong to the first part of his writing, that is before de monothelite crisis (638). More precisely, those chapters have been forged during the most fertile

period of saint Maximus' life when his main works were elaborated (*Ambigua*, *Mystagogia*, *Questions to Thalassius*).

The fourth chapter consists of a plan (4.) somehow different and more extended than the one Balthasar elaborated in 1961 and a division (5) of the chapters. This division was operated, on the one hand, from an analytic perspective (5.1), following the classical fields of research: philosophical (5.1.1.), dogmatic (5.1.2.), economical (5.1.3.), biblical (5.1.4.), ascetical/moral (5.1.5.), mystical (5.1.6.) and concerning knowledge (5.1.7.). On the other hand, from a thematic perspective the same chapters are divided into: anthropological (5.2.1.), time and eon (5.2.2.), *Exaiphnēs* (5.2.3.), Sabbath (5.2.4.), Sinai (5.2.5.), Tabor (5.2.6.), The Promised Land (5.2.7.), Scripture (5.2.8.), mystical topology (5.2.9.), divine names (5.2.10.), eschatological (5.2.11.).

(6.) The Edifice of saint Maximus' Thought

The sixth chapter approaches the ontological aspect of saint Maximus' thought. This approach is made in four different ways. Thus, the four subchapters follow the structure proposed by saint Maximus in his *Mystagogia*, which in turn follows the four principles of Christianity (God, man, world and Scripture). This time however, the edifice of church is no longer in the centre of the analysis but the theological thought and its coordinates. In the first subchapter (6.1.) I analyze the teaching about God. Here are debated the main themes of dogmatic theology: apophaticism and catafaticism, the being of God and His uncreated energies, divine theology and economy. We are dealing here with the two Prologues of the *Centuries*. The first Prologue (6.1.2.) represents a summary of the antiorigenistic critique that Maximus developed indirectly in many other writings. The second subchapter (6.2.) briefly analyzes the conception of the world/cosmos as it is prompted by chapter 3 of *Mystagogia* and other texts. In the third chapter (6.3.) I have identified and analyzed the précis of theological anthropology that this texts offers. Indeed, here are presented all the main themes of anthropology: the image and likeness of God, liberty, union with God, divinization. The fourth subchapter analyzes de teaching about the Holy Scripture as it appears in this work and in similar texts.

At the end of this analysis the following theses emerged: (1) The theological discourse proposed by Maximus includes the full spectrum of Christian thought. (2) All theological aspects (dogmatic, biblical, moral, ascetical/mystical) are presented

here in a close connection. (3) This type of theological discourse is in accord with the ensemble of Maximus the Confessor's work.

(7.) The horizon of theological act: the Mystery of Christ

Chapter 7 approaches the phenomenological aspect of the theological discourse and of its elaboration. The first subchapter (7.1.) describes the central mystery of Christianity that is the incarnation of the Son of God. The second subchapter (7.2.) deals with the list of general mysteries that Maximus describes in his *Commentary on the Lord's Prayer*. These mysteries are: the teaching about God, becoming sons of God, equality with angels, participation, unification of human nature, abolition of the law of sin and renewal of humanity, abolition of evil. In the centre of his theological thought is the central mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God and of the divinization of man.

The following theses emerged at the end of this analysis: (1) The mystery of incarnation and of divinization are mutual paradigms. (2) The relevance of this structure for the contemporary theological thinking comes from her holistic character, comprising all the aspects of cosmos, man, Scripture and of the teaching about God. (3) This chapter shows that at the core of Byzantine thought stands the notion of *mystery*. The mystery is not a simple idea that logical definitions can exhaust, neither a nebula of thought within which all irrational allegorizations are allowed. On the contrary, the mystery represents the perfect synthesis of rationality and spiritual intuition. (4) The mystery is the participative form of knowledge, that is every knowledge brings forth the communion with the supreme Person that reveals knowledge. (5) The participative knowledge, as partaking of the uncreated energies becomes an initiation in mystery, a *mystagogy*.

(8.) The contemplative nature of theology

Chapter 8 stands at the centre of this thesis. It approaches the very nature of theological discourse from the eastern Orthodox perspective. From this point of view the theological act has an essentially contemplative character. In this way the elaboration of theological discourse is in close relation with the main themes of Byzantine asceticism and mysticism (purification, illumination, and divinization). Furthermore, the contemplative nature talks about the fact that the theological truths

are in fact mysteries that demand a participative knowledge, an initiation and the possibility of a potentially infinite deepening in those mysteries.

In the first subchapter (8.1.) I analyze the structure of the cognitive act. Being composed of subject, object, and the relation between them, this act is multifaceted. As such, it cannot reach the direct knowledge of the divine being that transcends the ontological and cognitive categories. Nonetheless, the cognitive act and the theological discourse that follows presuppose a very precisely defined structure. In the subchapter about *exaiphnēs* (8.2.) I have analyzed the spontaneous character of spiritual knowledge. The theological knowledge has also a supernatural feature, presupposing though ascetical endeavour and contemplative effort.

In the third subchapter (8.3.) I analyze the main perils and transgressions of the theological discourse in the light of Christian spirituality. What results is indeed a *pathology* of theological knowledge and discourse. In this section I have reconstituted also some elements of the historical and social context of Maximus' life. I issued some suppositions concerning the monastic environment where these lapses occur. The last subchapter deals with the biblical formula *the mind of Christ* (1 Corinthians 2, 16).

At the end of this analysis the following theses emerged: (1) The Byzantine theology contains a very precise elaboration of the theological discourse. (2) The nature of the theological discourse is determined by the communitarian, moral and mystical aspects of Christianity. (3) This point of view has biblical roots. (4) There is an entire list of the deformed ways the theological discourse may be exercised.

(9.) The mystical typology of time

Chapter 9 deals with the texts influenced by Aristotelian philosophy and his neoplatonic commentators. Maximus offers a personal interpretation of the Aristotelian categories (space, time, relation). Time and space provide the occasion to develop the mystical teaching about the participation. Every Christian participates in the narrative of the divine dispensation narrated in the Old Testament, the latter being the explicative background in which it finds its coherence. In the first subchapter I talk about the typology of time developed in the texts about Sabbath, circumcision, harvest, the three days. In the second subchapter I analyze the biblical typology of space where we find themes like Sinai, Promised Land, Tabor, or Carmel.

At the end of this analysis the following theses emerged: (1) this biblical exegesis offers the perfect synthesis between Christian spirituality and hermeneutics. (2) This synthesis belongs naturally to the Byzantine tradition and thought which includes saint Maximus. (3) The partaking of every Christian in the dispensation of salvation takes place on all three levels: historical, ecclesial/liturgical and personal.

(10.) The evangelical economy of mysticism

The tenth chapter of this thesis addresses the extension of the evangelical dispensation of Christ in every Christian's life. On the one hand I have interpreted the texts that follow closely both the chronological development of the evangelical drama, and the typological exegesis. In those texts we find the theme of the *life in Christ*.

At the end of this analysis there emerged the following theses: (1) The main narrative that theology should use in every discursive argument is the Bible. (2) Orthodox theology cannot begin from a metaphysical system, neither from a moral scheme, but mainly from the Gospel narrative. (3) This type of approach offers a pattern for the synthesis of liturgics, dogmatics, biblical exegesis, and spirituality.

(11.) Conclusions

At the end of this research I have reached the following general conclusions: (1) The theological discourse developed in the writings of saint Maximus the Confessor has a contemplative nature. (2) At least from the point of view of coherence the theological discourse must encompass the full thematic spectrum of Christian thought. (3) At the core of Christian theology stands the notion of mystery. (4) The theological discourse must follow the synthesis of all theological disciplines. (5) There is a *pathology* of this discourse. (6) The fundament of theological discourse is the fidelity towards Christian tradition and its biblical roots.

This research brings forth the following contributions: I offer here a new type of argument, *congenial*, that I think is more suitable for the eastern theological literature. (1) The theological act is analyzed from both ontological and phenomenological perspectives, the former being unfolded in the four principles of God, man, world, and Scripture, and the latter explaining the centrality of the mystery of incarnation and divinization. (2) The nature of theological discourse has a contemplative feature that sums up the moral requirements and a way of seeing the revelation in the formula *contemplative mind*. This contemplative mind is the

charismatic faculty of the theological act. (3) This approach allows Christian theology to maintain a close relation with the Gospel and the liturgical readings and exegesis.

From the point of view of both the new directions and arrears made by this research we can state the following: (1) A deeper analysis is required of the thematic and textual parallels between these two *Centuries* and other works of saint Maximus. This analysis can provide a more precise dating. (2) We await the announced critical edition of these *Centuries* to have the definitive text. (3) The central theme of interior dispensation of Logos in every Christian's life needs further reflection. (4) And lastly, we need an extended research of this writing from the point of view of its influence and interpretation.