

Christological Perichoresis

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Abstract

I reclaim the patristic Christological use of perichoresis by showing how in bringing together different entities, such as God and Nature in unity as the one person of Christ, we can acknowledge the perichoresis between divine human and nature. Christological perichoresis supports the idea that the whole creation is included in God's recreated cosmos, in response to the redeeming power of Christ who entered the web of life as a creature. Trinitarian relationships bear a Christological message for intentional openness towards the "other". Thus ecofeminism can be considered from a Christian view, realizing Christ's "cosmic" role in the salvation of the entire cosmos.

Keywords

Perichoresis, Trinitarian, Christological, Interrelatedness, Ecofeminism

1. Introduction

One of my motivations for focusing on perichoretic relations as the co-inherence in Christ of the human and divine natures is that it illustrates the relationship between God the Creator and the creation. My goal is for a healed relationship among humans and between humans, the earth and its beings, which will ultimately lead to a holistic perichoretic consciousness and a culture opposing domination-systems as well as the exploitation of nature. The eco-theological problem is one of humanity being in non-perichoretic relationship within itself, God, and the rest of creation. To heal this rift is a process of cultivating perichoretic relations between them, in Christ. In this article I trace the development of the concept of "perichoresis" as a preliminary to studying its promise, potential, and implications for ecotheology.

2. Brief History of Trinitarian Perichoresis

2.1. The Definition of Perichoresis

The Eastern Church Fathers borrowed both the verb and the noun from Anaxagoras where it means revolution,

rotation as cosmic differentiation, ordering, continuation, and extension. The noun *περιχώρησις* names the process of making room for another around oneself, or to extend one's self round about. August Deneffe linked perichoresis to the stoic concept of mixture, which means a mutual interpenetration of two substances that preserves the identity and property of each intact (Harrison, 1991: p. 54).

From Anaxagoras to John of Damascus its meaning took a new content, in a Christological context. The fathers contextualized “*περιχώρησις*” from Anaxagoras’ cosmological, mechanistic context to use it in a Christological and Trinitarian one.

2.2. Eastern Church Fathers

2.2.1. The Cappadocian Fathers

They insisted on “three persons but one essence” (Elwell, 2001: pp. 205-206). Gregory of Nazianzus preached of one God, three in unity and equal; each distinct in the person's own property and each one God because of consubstantiality. There is in the Godhead an identity of hypostatic substance, which is distinct as each differs in relation to origin (Davis, 1983: pp. 116-117). If there are no hypostases in God of one essence, the indwelling of the Godhead is questioned. Gregory of Nyssa wrote the treatise, *To Ablabius* to prove that “there are not three gods”. He explains that trying to know the divine nature we do not express what the essence of the nature is (Νύσσης, PG, τ. 45, 121). The one divine nature rejects diversity in essence. Creation and redemption are trinitarian acts; (Ἀνδρούτσου, 1956: σελ. 92), in God's manifestation to the cosmos, it is three divine persons in *περιχώρησις*. The Son fills and contains all things, contained in the Father who fills and contains all things, while contained in the Son (Νεῖλος, PG τ. 79, 213).

2.2.2. Pseudo-Cyril

He applied “*περιχώρησις*” in a trinitarian sense to the idea of coinherence (Κύριλλος, PGτ. 77, 1144B). He sees two causes of divine unity: the identity of essence and the mutual perichoresis presupposing their threeness (Harrison, 1991: p. 60). Both *ousia* and *hypostases* had been explained; the doctrine needed to be defined from the aspect of either term. Perichoresis needed to shape a definition starting from the term *hypostasis* that would express the truth of one God. Without it, tritheism could appear. It is not now perichoresis “to” but “in” one another. Perichoresis “to” one another speaks of equivalent or alternative persons; “in” one another that they are co-extensive, forming the reverse of *ousia*'s identity (Prestige, 1964: p. 297).

2.2.3. John of Damascus

He is the last of the early church fathers to discuss “perichoresis”. Things created cannot describe the uncreated divine essence. Each trinitarian person is related to the others as to itself, having their being in one another without coalescence or commingling. (Δαμασκηνού, 1989: σελ.58, 64, 66). Christological perichoresis proclaims: one person in Christ (New Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 11, 1967: pp. 128-129). The eastern fathers knew God as one being in three presentations.

3. The Use of Perichoresis by Modern Theologians

The defence of a social conception of the trinity started with Moltmann (Kilby, 2000: 432-445), who retrieves John Damascene's doctrine of trinitarian *περιχώρησις* (Moltmann, 1993: p. 174). For him, through the idea of perichoresis, the social doctrine of the trinity expresses the eternal indwelling and community of the divine persons as basis for differentiation and unity of God (John 14:11, 10:30). Trinitarian perichoresis can be the starting point for the account of all analogously dualistic relations reflecting the mutual indwelling and interpenetration of trinitarian perichoresis for him: God in the world, the world in God; heaven, earth in God's kingdom; soul, body as a whole in the life giving Spirit; woman-man as whole human beings. Life as perichoresis designates an ecological doctrine of creation for Moltmann (Moltmann, 1997: pp. 15-17). Some of Moltmann's ideas served as reference points for feminist and ecofeminist theologians, struggling against dualisms in patriarchal structures. For Moltmann, female metaphors of God are symbols of metanoia. Masculinity, femininity and all dualistic relations are sinful, requiring holistic healing processes and redemption. According to him, the ecumenical and ecological resonance in God's incarnated Wisdom and the indwelling Spirit as trinitarian perichoresis embody justice for women and the entire creation (Keller, 1996: pp. 142-53).

According to Boff, ecological discourse is about the web of relationship that constitutes and sustains the cos-

mos and makes it possible to speak of God as a trinity of persons. This is a dynamic metaphysics not a static, ontological one. Christians know God as communion, not as the result of persons who upon being in and for them thereupon began to relate. If there were “one” divine figure, solitude would prevail. Were there “two”, it would be the dual narcissism of a couple. A “third” figure forces the others to turn their gaze from each other to other directions, dialectic of three interrelated, distinct persons (Boff, 1997: pp. 155-156). Trinitarian perichoresis emerges as a modern concept in tune with our cosmology, encountering all closed systems (Boff, 1997: pp. 24-26, 154-156).

Johnson envisions a triple helix. The double helix carries the genetic code of human life. The strands of the helix do not arise from each other but are together. The relations may be modelled on human analogies for the interaction of male-female, parent-child; friend-friend. If God’s image is the reference point for the community’s values, the triune symbol critiques patriarchal domination in church and society (Johnson, 1999: pp. 222-223).

According to LaCugna, when the doctrine of the Father’s monarchy weakened because of the Cappadocian doctrine of intra-divine relations, the idea of perichoresis replaced it. A divine person is by nature in relation to the other persons (Κύριλλος, PG 73, 81). Perichoresis avoids locating the divine unity either in the divine essence or in the person of the Father; it locates unity in a communion of persons (LaCugna, 1993: pp. 270-271). For LaCugna the claim of feminist theology that a human community of equals is an icon of God’s relational life is made by turning to the economy of salvation and of human community that Jesus proclaimed, revealing the reign of God. The starting point in the economy of redemption locates perichoresis not in God’s inner life, but in the mystery of the communion of both divine and human persons. One perichoresis includes God and humanity (LaCugna, 1993: pp. 270-274). LaCugna develops a relational ontology of persons, both human and divine in communion (LaCugna, 1993: p. 275). For her, Wilson’s Christology shows that though equality and mutuality among persons are basic to trinitarian theology, theological anthropology and soteriology, a sphere of intra-divine relations is a fragile basis. She critiques perichoresis in Boff, who equates the divine essence with perichoresis. The divine relations and the idea that divine life consists of a mutual revelation of the persons is scholastic theology far from the biblical witness to the role of each person, it is a reified account of divine essence¹.

4. On the Use of Perichoresis by Modern Theologians

4.1. Challenging the Social Doctrine of the Trinity

The use of social analogies to the trinity is problematic (Kilby, 2000: pp. 432-445). For modern theology, person is a technical term in the trinitarian formula; for social theorists, our society’s meaning of person should return to the trinitarian idea for today personhood leads to individualism.

According to Moltmann to avoid absolutism, we can adopt a social doctrine of the trinity for a ruler’s monarchy does not accord to the trinity. If one probes further into Kasner’s feminist tribute of the social trinity, a suspicion of projection arises. For her, the trinity is a mutuality of persons who choose to go out and enter in relationships. According to Moltmann, the trinitarian persons do not exist and then enter into relationship, but are comprised in their relationships. According to Kilby, the divine perichoresis is beyond our experience; projection is doubtful; what is projected onto God is reflected back onto the world. The doctrine is not a descriptive of God, but a Christian structuring principle. Theologians must not use it claiming an insight into God’s life to promote social, political or ecclesiastical regimes (Kilby, 2000: 432-445). Coakley argues that Gregory’s of Nyssa trinitarian theology is about the unity of divine will and action; not probing into the details of Godhead’s nature. Gregory not starting from the three is not a “social” Trinitarian. The tack is of “communion” between the persons not “community”. Gregory’s analogies for the trinity stress the indivisibility of the persons and the fluidity in their bounds. An apophatic sensibility attends any talk of God’s essence (Coakley, 2002: pp. 112-120).

4.2. Perichoresis: Analogia Relation Is Devoid of Analogia Entis?

In his social doctrine of the trinity, Moltmann stresses the “perichoretically consummated life processes” of the persons who “must not be reduced to three modes of being of one divine subject”, and whose unity “cannot be

¹Graham Buxton, “On the Trinitarian doctrine of perichoresis.”

http://www.taboradelaide.com/downloads/downloads_about/staff_articles/On_the_Trinitarian_doctrine_of_perichoresis.doc

seen in a general concept of divine substance". The unity of the persons is neither substantial nor numerical, but a unity of communal love. Perichoresis is used without the mutual interpenetration in the one divine nature of the persons (Otto, 2001: p. 373), yet it needs an ontological basis for relations if it is not just a conceptual relationship. Even quantum theory shows how energy is exchanged on the subatomic level between the smallest particles that for their wave-like behaviour assume something substantially existing in dynamic relation that elicits energy when colliding (Otto, 2001: pp. 366-384). The fact that God is the Father adds to the mode of being, a person. There are no persons without relation, neither relation without persons. If "person" is known in trinitarian terms of relation and context the persons do not only subsist in the common divine substance; they also exist in their mutual relation, an idea expressed in the early church's doctrine of trinitarianism. Persons realize themselves in one another by virtue of love.

4.3. What Kind of Language Is Trinitarian Language?

Ecofeminists challenge all language as translation of experiences. According to Coakley, we know "Father"-trinitarian language as metaphorical since Gregory of Nyssa discerns human from divine fatherhood. If Gregory makes a parallel move, human "father" language can be analogical derivative from the divine, instead of divine "Father" language that is either metaphorical or analogical based on human prototypes. For Gregory the names father and mother bear the same meaning for there is "neither male nor female" in God (Χρήστου, 1989: σελ. 234-237).

Gender stereotypes must be "reversed, undermined and transcended". A plethora of biblical allegorical references draws us beyond complacency. Gregory's "analogies" show an apophatic sensibility for the divine essence, to be known as "metaphors" in modern terms. Each one bears a sense of the ineffable divine nature, exposing the limits of what we say about God (Coakley, 2002: pp. 128-129, 124-127).

4.4. Does "Communion" Belong to the Level of "Substance"?

A work related to John Zizioulas substantiates the "social trinity of the east", where "personhood" is prior to "substance", according to Coakley (Coakley, 2002: p. 434). For her, Gregory of Nyssa does not prioritize "person" over "substance", a polemical in Zizioulas's (Coakley, 2002: p. 123) thought, who discusses the terms in the patristic era of both Athanasius and the Cappadocians. Zizioulas prioritizes neither "person" over "substance" nor "substance" over "person". For him, in Athanasius' ontology, the Son's being belongs to God's substance, an idea Athanasius used to argue against the Arians. By connecting the Son's being with God's substance, he transformed the idea of substance. "Father" is a relational term (Zizioulas, 2005: pp. 84-85, 60 footnote). "Has God ever existed without God's own Son"? (Athanasius, PG 26, 2, Λόγος Πρώτος 33). Given the character of God's being, substance is known only as communion. A relational term, "hypostasis" entered into ontology; an ontological category "hypostasis" entered the relational categories of being. To identify God's being with a person rather than with *ousia* makes possible a biblical doctrine of God the Father while solving the problem of *homoousion*, as for the relation of the Son to the Father. In making the Father the ground of God's being, theology founded the Son's otherness on one *ousia*. Athanasius' relational idea of substance becomes in the work of the Cappadocians the ontology of personhood (Zizioulas, 2005: pp. 83-89, 67, footnote). According to Zizioulas, the ontological position of the eastern fathers might be that no substance-nature exists without person-hypostasis. The ontological cause of being is not substance or nature but person or hypostasis. Being is traced back not to *ousia* but to the person of the Father. Coakley's Latin exegesis gives priority to divine *ousia* (Coakley, 2002: p. 123, 52 footnote). To admit that there was a time when only *ousia* existed, implies that the *prosopa* were not eternal. Perichoresis safeguarded the ομοούσιον of the trinitarian persons and replaced the patristic doctrine that God's unity belonged to the Father. The model of perichoresis does not locate the divine unity either in the divine essence or in the person of the Father; it locates unity in a communion of persons (LaCugna, 1993: pp. 270-271). God's life is shown by the perichoretic relations of the divine persons. Creation and redemption are trinitarian acts; (Ανδρούτσου, 1956: σελ. 92) in God's manifestation to the cosmos, it is three divine persons in περιχώρησις.

5. Christological Perichoresis

Gregory of Nazianzus (Nazianzus, NIDCC, p. 435) applied the verb perichoreo first to Christology: Christ made all things; the names of the natures are mingled as the natures mutually perichorize. In Epistle 101 we read of

how divine and human natures unite in Christ. The renewal of creation has been the work of the incarnated Creator Λόγος who made it. The natures and the titles mutually reciprocate (Γρηγορίου Θεολόγου, PGτ. 37, 182). According to Harrison the interchange of names is grounded ontologically in the mutual interpenetration of natures, which Gregory identifies by the terms admixture and mixture. Here perichoresis indicates the exchange of titles, activities and attributes, termed as ἀντίδοσις τῶν ιδιωμάτων in Maximus' wording that is an exchange of properties. The Alexandrians could find Cyril's basic insight that the person of the incarnate is identical with that of the divine Word (Davis, 1983: p. 176). Maximus alludes to this text. In his wording perichoresis is ascribed to both of Christ's natures and to their energies that for him are consistent with their natures. Maximus was the first church father to develop a theological definition of perichoresis related to the *hypostatic* union of Christ after studying the texts of Gregory of Nazianzus whom he follows in the Christological use of the term. In Maximus' texts, first the verb περιχωρέω appears and then the noun. In his scholia on Dionysius (Nazianzus, epistle 4.8), he quotes περιχωρέω of the two natures of Christ from Gregory of Nazianzus (Γρηγορίου Θεολόγου, PGτ. 37, 182), the seventh century opponent of the monothelism heresy². The human nature hypostatically and unconfusedly is united with the divine. Maximus uses the verb περικεχώρηκε (ambig. 112b D) meaning "reciprocal" (Prestige, 1964: p. 292). According to John of Damascus, the Word appropriates to Himself the attributes of humanity and imparts to the flesh His own attributes by way of communication in virtue of the perichoresis of the parts, one with the other, and the oneness according to subsistence. The natures of Christ interpenetrate one another but each keeps its own individuality unchanged. The flesh of the Lord was not defied and made equal to God by change, alteration, transformation, or confusion of nature (Δαμασκηνού, 1989: Γ' 3, σελ. 220, 222, Γ' 4, σελ. 224, Γ' 5, σ. 226, 228, Γ' 7, 238, Γ' 8, 240, Γ' 15, σ. 226, Γ' 19, 304). In Christology, perichoresis shows how the Saviour's two natures are united while distinct, making his human sufferings salvific. The Fourth Ecumenical Council ruled that Jesus Christ is "in two natures", in opposition to the doctrine of monophysitism. The unity of person is "by reason of this unity of person to be known in both natures, the Son of Man is said to have come down from heaven when the Son of God took flesh from the virgin from whom he was born" (Davis, 1983: p. 176). The Council of Chalcedon distinguished between person and nature; the person of Christ being one, his natures two. Since the incarnation, the divine and human natures remain forever mutually present. Even after his death, Christ comes both in humanity and in divinity. The Christ confessed by Christians exists eternally, one and the same both before and after the salvation economy, yet divinity is not subject to death.

When Maximus applies perichoresis to Christology, it means reciprocity of action. He offers as illustration the reciprocal actions of cutting and burning, shown by a red-hot knife (Μάξιμος, PGτ. 90, 340). Maximus tried to explain the singleness of action and effect proceeding from the two natures in Christ's person. He calls the process perichoresis of the two natures "to" one another, not "in" or "through" one another. This may suggest that the penetration of the created into the uncreated cannot be an exhaustive one. According to Pseudo-Cyril, in Christ divinity was the anointing element, as the perichoresis of the entire chrism into the entire anointed humanity, yet the permeative unction is one of grace. The two natures do not change into a compound nature; united hypostatically, they receive an unconfused perichoresis from one another. Divine nature, having penetrated flesh, offers to flesh a perichoresis with itself flowing from the divinity, a one-sided process. It was not enough to say that Christ has two natures united into one hypostasis. More is needed to express the relationship of union between the two natures. Pseudo-Cyril tries to avoid Monophysitism; it is not easy to avoid a confusing meaning in the terms "interpenetration" or "coinherence". He did not safeguard himself by realizing interpenetration and ἀντίδοσις just as terms; without a real basis, the term would not be intelligible (Stead, 1953: pp. 12-20). The Chalcedonian Creed (451) expresses the union of Christ's natures negatively, united "inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably" (Davis, 1983: p. 186), yet not explaining how this can be. Christianity is a communion with the living God in Christ, beyond explanation, affirmation or negation. The apophatic dimension of the unity of Christ's natures remains. The patristic doctrine of Perichoresis remains as a monument of inspired Christian rationalism. Damascene popularised it. The term perichoresis was used by the church fathers to defend the one God in three hypostases and the one Christ in two natures against heresies. Gregory the Theologian explicitly relates both creation and incarnation. Λόγος is both creator and re-creator of the world. Thus we can face both incarnation and creation of the world as Christological perichoresis towards the world to create

²The council of Constantinople, III (680) the 6th Ecumenical Council of the Church, ruled out Monothelism and settled for Dyothelism. Both natures, human and divine are perfect consubstantial with God and man, preexistent and born from the virgin, Davis, *The First seven ecumenical Councils (325-787) their History and Theology*, pp. 282-283.

and recreate the cosmos. Maximus applying perichoresis to Christology speaks of the interchange in the moment of uttering the spoken word and in the idea it expresses, both named λόγος in Greek, (Prestige, 1964: pp. 292-293), concepts that lead to creation when latent words are spoken. This approach opens up the cosmic dimensions of the continuous work of the trinity within creation through Christ.

6. Cosmic Christological Perichoresis

According to Maximus who uses “perichoresis” in a soteriological context, the salvation of souls is the fulfillment of faith. This in turn is the true revelation of the object of faith as the inexpressible perichoresis of what has been believed and the “completion of the cycle” (περιχώρησις). For each person’s faith, what has been believed that relates to an end, concurring with a beginning, means the recurrence of the believers at the end to their own beginning. This idea relating the recurrence to an end that coincides with a beginning is decisive for the term “perichoresis” (Prestige, 1964: pp. 99, 293). Such repose is eternal enjoyment entailing participation in divine realities, meaning that the participant becomes like that in which she/he participates.

The deification that God fulfils transcends both time and eon surpassing all thought (2 Corinthians 5:18-20, Romans 5:10). The conception of participation in the divine shows that perichoresis means interpenetration here. Created beings penetrate into the divine, though this is brought about through God’s activity (Prestige, 1964: p. 293). According to Harrison, the Christological perichoresis involves here more than that of the saints, a point to remember in considering discussions on the one-sidedness of perichoresis in Christ. In my own view, Maximus stresses here both the anthropological and cosmic implications of the incarnation (Μάξιμος, PGτ. 90, 609).

Neither Trinitarian nor Christological perichoresis describe God. It is not an insight into Christ’s divine nature. Any biblical or patristic reference to the unity of the divine and human natures of Christ shows a deep apophatic sensibility about the unity, exposing the limits of what we say about God and the cosmos in Christ (Coakley, 2002: pp. 124-129). Christological perichoresis is a Christian structuring principle, not a description of “how” divinity and humanity are united in Christ. An encounter with Jesus involves a radical shift in ourselves as if we are reborn (John 3:5) (Μ. Αθανασίου, 1973: σελ. 260-261). What brings us nearer to Christ’s truth does not come into our awareness through scientific reflection on cosmic structures, but through an encounter with the ultimate reality allowing us to sense a further dimension of pain as separation from creator Λόγος, the reality of our lives. The entire creation is waiting for the unity to be achieved (Clarke, 2002: pp. 225, 9, 31).

Maximus refers to the time when “all will be in all”, as the culmination of human ascent (Louth, 1996: p. 162). The idea also means co-inherence and all the notions we associate with perichoresis. God is everything beyond everything (Σωτηρόπουλος, 1993: σελ. 150). Maximus preserves a cosmic dimension in his theology. According to Apostle Paul, “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:19, 21-2), a theme central in Colossians and Ephesians revealing God the Father’s mystery of will according to God’s purpose, set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in heaven and on earth, in him’ (Ephesians 1: 9-10) (Louth, 1996: p. 63).

In my own view, it is not Trinitarian, as Moltmann claims (Moltmann, 1997: pp. 15-17) but Christological perichoresis that can be known as a starting point for an ecological doctrine of creation. I reclaim the patristic Christological use of perichoresis, by showing how in bringing together different entities, such as God and Nature, and looking at them in unity as the one person of Christ, we can acknowledge the perichoresis between the divine, humanity and nature. Christological perichoresis supports the idea that the whole creation is included in God’s recreated cosmos, in response to the redeeming power of Christ who entered the web of life as a creature. Christological perichoresis goes further than the ecofeminist model of scientific interrelatedness among the beings of the cosmos, as it speaks of the Creator who sustains and recreates creation. The effects of the hypostatic union in Christ between Creator and creation extend throughout the cosmos. The self-emptying of God in Christ questions all constructions about the Trinity as time/space bound. Christological perichoresis is seen as trinitarian manifestation extending to include all created beings in a coinherence with God and each other. Preserving distinctiveness, it enables interchange of life between various levels of reality in space/time as a Christian ontology of love (Harrison, 1991: pp. 63-65). An ecological, perichoretic view of creation brings hope for humans as co-members of the cosmos.

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