

## “The Blessed Passion of Holy Love”: Maximus the Confessor’s Spiritual Psychology

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**Abstract:** *This article investigates Maximus the Confessor's attitude towards the passions of the soul. Maximus' understanding of the passions is rooted in the Byzantine inheritance of neo-Platonism, and owes a great deal to Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399). However, Maximus developed an original understanding of the passions and their workings on the will of fallen humankind. In particular we will find that he emphasised the potential for transformation of the passions into instruments for bringing the Christian closer to God. The role of the passions in each of the three stages of the Christian's path to God will be examined: namely, the ascetic struggle, meditation and divine contemplation. In his appreciation of the importance of community in the Christian life, Maximus' teaching on the passions has something valuable to offer modern theories of spiritual development.*

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**Key Words:** Maximus the Confessor; passions; Evagrius of Pontus; spiritual growth – Christian; ascetic theology; meditation; contemplation

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**M**aximus the Confessor (580-662 CE) is perhaps the greatest synthesizer of the Byzantine tradition on the spiritual life. His spiritual psychology is centred on the single concept of love: how we relate to God, to our neighbour, to ourselves, and to the natural world. Several of his texts focus on how to live out these relationships in a practical way. These include his *Centuries on Love* in four hundred short paragraphs or “chapters”, *Centuries on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God*, the two *Books of Difficulties* and several of his letters, especially the *Letter to Thalassius*.<sup>1</sup> For Maximus, love is the absolutely universal relationship, and “training in Christian spiritual practice amounts to a training in love.”<sup>2</sup> Maximus’ contribution is significant for a contemporary Christian understanding of the value of emotional detachment from the passions. It offers an interesting contrast to a more modern psychological theory of personality types and their characterization by particular passions, known as the Enneagram.

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<sup>1</sup> Extracts from all of these works appear in A. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor, Early Christian Fathers* (London: Routledge, 1996). This article owes a great debt to Louth's introductions to various key texts on the spiritual life which he has translated in that volume. I would direct readers with a further interest in the topic to his brilliant Introduction, Ch. 2 “The Sources of Maximus' Theology” and Ch. 3 “Maximus' Spiritual Theology”, 19-47. All of my translations are taken from there, unless otherwise stated. *Centuries on Love* have also been translated by G. Berthold, *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings, Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1985). Extracts from the *Letter to Thalassius* and the *Ambigua* are translated with commentary by P. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ. St Maximus the Confessor, Popular Patristics Series* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Louth, *Maximus*, 38.

The term "passion" in the Byzantine monastic tradition is often used as the equivalent of vice. It "nearly always indicates something evil."<sup>3</sup> Monastic discussions of the passions, such as the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers (Apothegmata)*, reveal an awareness of the huge variety of human personality types that all require different treatment in their spiritual practice.<sup>4</sup> Maximus defined passion as "the impulse of the soul contrary to nature" (*Centuries on Love* II.16). Louth offers a modern gloss of this, describing passions as "moods or desires that come upon us, often obsessively, and disturb or distract us."<sup>5</sup>

The opposite of passion is "dispassion" (*apatheia*), and this was seen as the goal of the ascetic struggle by Greek and Egyptian monks as well as those in the West who, like Augustine, were influenced by neo-Platonism. The neo-Platonic ascent to God was seen to take place in three stages:

- (1) ascetic struggle;
- (2) meditation, or spiritual contemplation of the natural world; and
- (3) prayer, or divine contemplation.

I wish to examine how Maximus viewed the role of the passions in each of these stages of the spiritual life.

The main influence on Maximus' theory of the passions, with some adaptation, was Evagrius of Pontus, a Greek monk (d. 399 CE) who wrote various treatises on the ascetical life for monks in the Egyptian desert, such as *The Practical Treatise*, also known simply as *The Monk*, and the *Gnostic Centuries (Kephalaia Gnostica)*. Maximus' other sources include Diadochus, the mid-fifth century bishop of Photike in Epiros, author of the *Century on Perfection*, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, author of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, the Divine Names*, and the *Celestial Hierarchy*. Pseudo-Dionysius's precise identity and time of writing are unknown, but he is thought to have lived circa 500 CE. All of these writers worked and thought within a neo-Platonic framework within which they sought to develop a distinctively Christian view of the spiritual life as lived in community. I will consider some of the features of Maximus' teaching on the passions that can be traced to these sources, while pointing to several key differences between Maximus and Evagrius on this subject.

## I. MAXIMUS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE PASSIONS

Maximus and Evagrius both distinguished between bodily passions — such as hunger, thirst and lust — and passions of the soul. The bodily passions do not concern us here. The passions of the soul which are problematic are those which are "contrary to nature," (*Centuries on Love* II.16),<sup>6</sup> not those natural passions which are natural. The natural passions, or those in accordance with our unfallen nature, are perfectly appropriate if directed towards God. The eight principal "unnatural" passions of the soul according to Evagrius were gluttony, fornication, avarice, grief, anger, *accidie* (i.e. listlessness), vainglory and pride.<sup>7</sup> Maximus adopts these eight principal passions and, following Plato's

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<sup>3</sup> Louth, Maximus, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Louth, Maximus, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Louth, *Maximus*, 36.

<sup>6</sup> This point is made by Louth, Maximus, 47.

<sup>7</sup> The Evagriian list of passions has a modern equivalent in the emotional passions of each of the nine personality types in the Enneagram: greed, lust, avarice, anger, pride, deceit, envy, fear and sloth.

Gluttony/greed, fornication/lust, avarice, anger, pride and listlessness/sloth appear in both schemata. There is

three-part division of the soul, explains how each part is affected by particular passions (*Ambigua* X.44).<sup>8</sup> The three Platonic divisions of the soul are the rational, irrational incensive (*irascibile*) and irrational desiring (*concupiscibile*) parts. The rational part of the soul is affected by the passions of vainglory and pride.<sup>9</sup> The irrational incensive part, the source of the soul's energy, is affected by grief and anger. The irrational desiring part is affected by gluttony, fornication, and avarice. All three are affected by accidie or listlessness. Maximus gives a prominent place to passions with social consequences such as resentment and envy, which Evagrius either ignores or subsumes (*Centuries on Love* III.90-91).<sup>10</sup> There are two elements of the passionate part of the soul, controlling and disordering our emotions. These are the incensive faculty, that is, the source of the soul's energy, and the desiring faculty of the soul. The passions link the soul to the physical world (*Centuries on Love* III.56). When the intellect is filled with God, incensiveness is transformed into divine love (*agapê*), and desire into intense longing for God (*erôs*) (*Centuries on Love* II.48).<sup>11</sup> That is why Maximus can speak of "the blessed passion of holy love" as our goal, through the transformation of the incensive and the desiring faculties of the soul (*Centuries on Love* III.67).<sup>12</sup>

## II. KEY DIFFERENCES FROM THE EVAGRIAN THEORY OF THE PASSIONS

While Maximus clearly owed a great debt to Evagrius, a number of crucial differences can be identified in his theory of the passions.<sup>13</sup> Four of these stand out as of first importance.

- (1) Evagrius's Origenist doctrine of prayer and the spiritual life is intended to enable the soul "to regain the state of being a pure mind from which it has fallen", but "for Maximus, the spiritual life is about how we love"<sup>14</sup> in community. Unlike Evagrius, Maximus does not accept the dualistic doctrine of Origen concerning the relationship between our body and our soul. According to the Origenist myth of origins, pure souls, which were originally incorporeal, once enjoyed unfettered contemplation of God. As the heavenly being Satan grew tired of such perfect enjoyment, he and other heavenly beings fell from heaven. The souls fell into the bodies of angels, human beings and demons, in descending order as the sin was greater. Thus the embodiment of human beings was seen as a punishment, and as the end result of abandoning perfect rest in God through movement away from God (the triad of rest, to movement, to embodiment). Evagrius stated explicitly

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no equivalent of Evagrian grief in the Enneagram. Vainglory and pride have been reduced there to the single passion of pride. Envy does not appear on the Evagrian list although Maximus gives it a prominent place. Fear is not recognised as a principal passion by Evagrius.

<sup>8</sup> The taxonomy of the soul in *Ambigua* X.44 borrows heavily from Nemesius of Emesa's *On Human Nature*.

<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere Maximus identifies pride as the combination of two vices of vainglory and arrogance. "Arrogance denies the Cause of Virtue and nature, while vainglory adulterates natures and virtue themselves. The arrogant accomplish nothing godly, and the vainglorious produce nothing natural. Pride is a combination of these two vices." *Ad Thalassium* 64, in *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, eds. C. Laga and C. Steel, *Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca* 22, 221, trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery*, 162.

<sup>10</sup> Louth, Maximus, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Louth, Maximus, 41.

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion of this phrase in Louth, Maximus, 40-41.

<sup>13</sup> An excellent study of the impact of Evagrius on Maximus' spiritual theology is that of M. Viller, "Aux sources de la spiritualité de S. Maxime: les oeuvres d'Évagre le Pontique", *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 11 (1930), 156-184, 239-268, 331-336.

<sup>14</sup> Louth, Maximus, 38.

that "Movement [of the soul] is the cause of evil."<sup>15</sup> Maximus described a different order of events in the soul's progress towards God, starting with the soul's birth into a body, followed by its movement towards God, and culminating in the soul finding rest in God (embodiment, to movement, to rest).<sup>16</sup> Thus, according to Maximus, movement of the soul is not evil in itself, and can be directed by reason. "The soul moves according to reason when the concupiscible part is ruled by self-restraint, when the irascible part turns away from sin and attains to charity, and when reason directs itself to God through prayer and spiritual knowledge" (*Centuries on Love* IV.15).<sup>17</sup>

- (2) For Evagrius the passions are points of attack for demons, and must be transcended. For Maximus, however, they are neutral in themselves and can be transformed into vices (those which are contrary to our pre-fallen nature) or virtues (those in conformity with our pre-fallen nature).<sup>18</sup> While Evagrius identified the two causes of evil as bad thoughts inspired by demons and evil thoughts inspired by our fallen will, Maximus identifies three causes of evil: the passions, demons, and the fallen will (*Centuries on Love* II.33, III.93).<sup>19</sup> The fallen will does not accord with our natural will, that which is in conformity with God's will for us.<sup>20</sup>
- (3) The passions are for Evagrius simply a register of the state of the soul, and are thus only of interest to the individual in his quest for enlightenment. Maximus however sees the passions as the product our relationships with others.<sup>21</sup> It is easy, as we have all experienced, to be dispassionate when you are alone on a mountain top! Maximus puts the emphasis on love expressed in relationship. The spiritual disciple needs a guide or teacher because *apatheia* can lead to the passions of vainglory and pride, to which the only antidote is humility, expressed in obedience to a spiritual father or mother.
- (4) Whereas Evagrius uses the notions of *logismos* (an obsessive chain of thought) and passion interchangeably,<sup>22</sup> for Maximus obsessive chains of thought (*logismoi*) are the precedents to a passion. So, for example, debilitating sexual desire would be a *logismos*, while fornication would be the passion resulting from putting this thought into action. For a monk, any degree of sexual desire was seen as inappropriate, while for a non-celibate lay person, lust was regarded as a normal bodily passion. First the passions have to be removed, before one can deal with the *logismoi*. When one's thoughts are "mere thoughts" and do not incite the passions, the highest state of dispassion has been reached (*Centuries on Love* I.93).

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<sup>15</sup> Kephalaia Gnostica I. 51, ed. M.W. Frankenburg, Evagrius Ponticus (Berlin: Wiedmann, 1912). My translation.

<sup>16</sup> Blowers has a good discussion of this in his introduction to *On the Cosmic Mystery*, 24-27.

<sup>17</sup> My translation.

<sup>18</sup> Viller, "Aux sources," 181.

<sup>19</sup> Viller, "Aux sources," 180 and n. 97.

<sup>20</sup> For further discussion of Maximus' view of the vices and virtues and the workings of the will, please refer to B. Neil, "Two views of Vice and Virtue: Augustine of Hippo and Maximus the Confessor", *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church 3: Liturgy and Life*, eds. B. Neil, G. Dunn and L. Cross (Sydney: St Pauls, 2003), 261-271. My sincere apologies to Virginia Burrus for misidentifying her (ibid., 262 n. 6) as holding the traditional view of the difference between the eastern church (as typified by Maximus) and the western church (of which Augustine is representative) in their attitudes towards the fallen will.

<sup>21</sup> Louth, Maximus, 39.

<sup>22</sup> Viller, "Aux sources," 181 n. 102.

Not all *logismoi* are intrinsically evil, however. There are also natural *logismoi* worthy of the soul engaged in contemplating and knowing divine mysteries.<sup>23</sup>

### III. THE THREE-FOLD PATH TO GOD

Now that we have considered how Maximus understood the passions, we can move on to consider their role in the Christian's three-fold path to God. As we have noted, in Maximus' writings, as in those of Evagrius, the struggle with the passions takes place in the first of three stages of ascent to God. Progress from one stage to the next was not linear or sequential, but allowed for overlap and regression in the disciple's journey.

#### *Stage 1: Ascetic Struggle (praktikê)*

While Evagrius saw the ascetic struggle as the special province of the monk, Maximus had a more inclusive notion of it as necessary for anyone who seeks to develop their spiritual nature. The aim of the ascetic struggle is dispassion, or disinterestedness (*apatheia*).<sup>24</sup> This is the state of detachment from the irrational parts of the soul but it is not detachment for its own sake, "but only so that, in their purified state, they can be reintegrated into the whole human being."<sup>25</sup> Only through such reintegration can Christians fully and truly love God, and consequently love themselves (for we are made in the image of God) and the rest of the created world. Trying to love God with only part of our soul is doomed to fail. The sequence of virtues that lead to dispassion follow each other like links in a chain, starting with the fundamental link of faith. Faith leads to fear of God, which leads to complete self-control, which in turn produces patience and forbearance. Patience and forbearance generate hope in God, which leads to dispassion and ultimately to love (*Centuries on Love* 1.1-2).<sup>26</sup>

What Maximus means by *apatheia* is not merely as disinterestedness, which would be a very solitary virtue, but also "purified love,"<sup>27</sup> that can only be manifest in our relationships with each other, with ourselves and ultimately with God. The path from being mastered by the passions to being able to control them in the state of *apatheia* is the path of personal development from self-love or egotism (*philautia*), the mother of the passions, to love of others (*philadelphia*).<sup>28</sup> The ultimate test of *apatheia* is being able to show love to one's enemies (*Centuries on Love* 1.61).<sup>29</sup> This is only possible through detachment from the passions, especially those with communal impact, such as hatred, grief, anger and resentment. This *apatheia* is not passive but an active state. Its outcome is virtue, which with practice becomes a habit of mind.

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<sup>23</sup> Ad Thalassium 64, CCSG 22, 211, trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery*, 156 and 157 n. 8.

<sup>24</sup> I have avoided translating *apatheia* as "passionlessness" as this word has an insipid connotation that would be quite misleading. Another translation that is sometimes used is "impassibility."

<sup>25</sup> Louth, Maximus, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Cited by Louth, Maximus, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Louth, Maximus, 41.

<sup>28</sup> Ad Thalassium 64 takes up the idea of the fulfillment of the scriptural law as consisting in the mutual union of love: "And if their ethical conduct and way of life are the same, they clearly also share the same bond of judgment in their relation to each other, a bond which guides them in single-mindedness toward the one principle of human nature, in which there is absolutely none of the divisions that possesses human nature because of self-love...By this love [of others], in turn, the scriptural law reaches its true fulfillment as all human beings are joined to one another in mutual love." (CCSG 22, 235, trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery*, 168).

<sup>29</sup> Cited by Louth, Maximus, 39-40.

### Stage 2: Meditation (*physikê*)

*Apatheia* leads to "mere thoughts", which signal "the beginnings of natural contemplation."<sup>30</sup> Mere thoughts are those that are free from passion, like the thoughts that are allowed to rise up and pass away without judgement in Buddhist meditation. Maximus writes in *Centuries on Love* I.93: "If the thoughts that continually rise up in the heart are free from passion, whether the body is awake or asleep, then we may know that we have attained the highest state of dispassion." They are thoughts purified, having transcended self-love. As Louth comments, "Mere thoughts, then, for Maximus, are a sign of that detachment that enables us to engage in the world and with others in a non-possessive way — with respect."<sup>31</sup>

Once the mind has been freed from the passions, it can engage without distraction in meditation or contemplation of the natural order. This involves a lot more than appreciation of the natural world. It is rather the contemplation of the rational principles (*logoi*) that underpin the natural order. The concept of *logoi* (the plural of *logos*) comes from Origen. The *logoi* are the principles according to which the Logos, or Word of God created everything in the cosmos.<sup>32</sup> They are the inner meanings in things. According to Maximus, the Fall has obscured our vision of God's meaning in the world and its parts. "We tend to see the world in relation to ourselves,"<sup>33</sup> as an "I-centred" universe. Learning to see creation as God sees it, or seeing the *logoi* in the natural order, amounts to the same thing as the Buddhist notion of insight (*vipassana*). It is seeing things as they really are, and also seeing each other as created in the image of God. Much interpersonal conflict arises from different perceptions of reality. Being freed from private prejudices and judgements created by the passions is learning to "manage" our personality. It means accepting reality as it is and not as you would like it to be. The outcome of this stage is knowledge, knowledge of incorporeal beings and corporeal beings, or knowledge of the Logos at work in the world.

### Stage 3: Divine Contemplation (*theologia*)

The third stage is that of prayer or divine contemplation. Prayer is a state rather than an activity.<sup>34</sup> As Evagrius put it beautifully in *Kephalaia Gnostica* VII.29, prayer is "the state of the soul illuminated solely by the light of the Holy Trinity in ecstasy."<sup>35</sup> This is the state of spiritual perfection. The irrational parts of the soul are not rejected but redirected: desire is transformed into divine *eros*, and incensiveness is transformed into divine *agape* (*Centuries on Love* II.48). Thus both desire and anger are reintegrated and the soul can love God in its completeness.

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<sup>30</sup> Louth, Maximus, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Louth, Maximus, 42. If we were to translate these into the nine passions of the Enneagram, when our thoughts are purified, we do not envy others (Type 4), we are not angry with them for failing to conform to our expectations (Type 1), we do not see them as needing us to survive (Type 2), we do not fear their emotional abandonment (Type 6), we will not need to deceive them with a false self image (Type 3), or bully them into submitting to our will (Type 8), and we will not be lazy or reluctant in fostering relationships (Types 9 and 5), or fearful of committing and staying committed (Type 7). An introduction to the use of the Enneagram as a tool for analyzing and improving interpersonal relationships is H. Palmer, *The Enneagram: Understanding Yourself and the Others in Your Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> Louth, Maximus, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Louth, Maximus, 37.

<sup>34</sup> Louth, Maximus, 37.

<sup>35</sup> Ed. Frankenberg, 452, cited by Viller, "Aux sources," 251. My translation.

This third and final stage is a matter of experience, not of intellectual speculation.<sup>36</sup> Here Maximus adopts Pseudo-Dionysius's teaching on apophatic union, the ineffable loss of self in the divine. After the initial stages of *kataphasis* (affirming what we know about God), and *apophasis* (denying that which we affirmed we could know about God), we reach the stage of union which is beyond words. Our final union with God is the union of unknowing, when the intellect is taken outside itself in ecstatic love for God. This is the state of pure prayer. As Maximus puts it, "he who truly loves God prays entirely without distraction, and he who prays entirely without distraction loves God truly" (*Centuries on Love* II.1).<sup>37</sup> The outcome of this stage is wisdom, the wisdom of the knowledge of God, in so far as that is possible for human beings (*Centuries on Love* II.26). Such wisdom is accompanied by joy: "...when man is perfected in wisdom, he acquires unspeakable joy, a potent joy able to maintain him with a godly and divine sustenance." (*Ad Thalassium* 64).<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Ascetical theology can at times seem negative, centring on cutting off the passions and separating oneself from the world. Maximus provided a significant corrective to this view, by balancing this negative side of the spiritual struggle with a positive emphasis on the importance of pure and deeper love, as he says in *Centuries on Love* I.34: "A pure soul is one freed from passions and consequently delighted by divine love." This love is directed not towards the self, but towards God and others.

Unlike the Origenists, Maximus believed that it is not enough for a Christian to achieve freedom from the passions and gain a purely intellectual attachment to the truth and divine knowledge. For Maximus the spiritual life must be practised in a community at least of two persons, namely the disciple and a spiritual father or mother (*Centuries on Love* III.66). Maximus' belief in the possibility for personal transformation in this life is rather different from the typical Western emphasis of Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and others on the notion of the essential flaw in our natures caused by original sin, which will stop us from being united to God if we are not redeemed through baptism. The Greek emphasis typified by Maximus is rather on restored human nature, which was the purpose and consequence of the incarnation of Christ in human form. As Maximus put it, "For it was necessary, necessary in truth, for him to become the light unto that earth...so that...he might wondrously liberate human nature from its bondage to these things under the Evil One, and endow it with the inextinguishable light of true knowledge and the indefatigable power of the virtues." (*Ad Thalassium* 64).<sup>39</sup> His focus is not on human corruption but incorruption, which is first received when the Christian is baptized in Christ through the Spirit (*Centuries on Theology and Incarnation* I.87).

Ascetical theology is all about how we come to know God. For Maximus, to know God is to love God, and to be deified through the Holy Spirit by grace. Deification is the purpose and consequence of the incarnation, which restored the original harmony and

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<sup>36</sup> In the language of the Enneagram, this stage is equivalent to realizing your essence, and finally culminates in developing a soul.

<sup>37</sup> Cited by Louth, Maximus, 38.

<sup>38</sup> *Ad Thalassium* 64, CCSG 22, 189; trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery*, 147. *Ad Thalassium* 64 gives an anagogical interpretation of the story of Jonah, in which Jonah is a figure of the passions of humanity. Jonah's progress is described as a descent from Joppa – signifying virtue, knowledge and the wisdom that is based on both – to the sea, the abyss of human nature's slavery to ignorance and evil (*ibid.*, 147-149).

<sup>39</sup> CCSG 22, 197; trans. Blowers and Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery*, 150.

wholeness of the cosmos. There is thus an important place for the passions in the Christian path towards union with God. This is an original and cautiously optimistic theology of the Christian life, and one which takes cognizance of our individual weaknesses. It offers a practical goal for achieving harmony within ourselves and harmony in community. As such it makes a valuable contribution and corrective to modern Western conceptions of spiritual development which often tend to focus on the individual personality, rather than on the person as member of a faith community.

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