Theological Studies
72 (2011)

CHRISTOLOGICAL POLEMICS OF MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR AND THE EMERGENCE OF ISLAM ONTO THE WORLD STAGE

GRIGORY I. BENEVICH

The article examines Maximus the Confessor's reaction to the Arab-Muslim invasion of the Byzantine Roman Empire. It also appraises Islam's place in the 7th century as presenting a view of divine-human relations as an alternative to the views of Christian confessions. The article concludes by advancing a hypothesis about the antithetical relationship between Islam and Monotheletism, which was dominant at that time in Byzantium.

DOGMA IN THE BYZANTINE ROMAN EMPIRE was not merely an expression of faith; it also played an ideological and political role. Given that Islam presented an alternative to Christianity, it is important to approach its emergence onto the stage of world history in the 7th century in the context of the christological controversies taking place in Byzantium at that time. This confrontation may shed light on some aspects of these controversies, as well as on the place Islam ultimately occupied among alternative worldviews.

To define this place at the very moment when Islam emerged is important for our own time, as is an understanding of the alternative view of divine-human relations held by Islam compared to those held by Christian confessions. In speaking about the christological controversies of the third and fourth decades of the 7th century in the Roman Empire, I look to the heritage of the most important Orthodox theologian of this epoch, Maximus the Confessor. Although his polemics during this period are well preserved and quite thoroughly studied, to

GRIGORY I. BENEVICH received his Ph.D. from the University of Culture and Art, St. Petersburg, Russia, and is a senior researcher in the Institute of the History of Christian Thought at the Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities, St. Petersburg. Specializing in the theory of culture, Orthodox theology, and church history, he has most recently published "God's *Logoi* and Human Personhood in St Maximus the Confessor," *Studi sull'Oriente Cristiano* 13 (2009); edited and authored the introduction and 13 articles and translations in *The Anthology of the Eastern Christian Theological Thought (Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy)*, 2 vols. (2009–2010); and authored the introduction and commentaries to the Russian annotated translation of Maximus the Confessor's *Quaestiones et Dubia* (2010). In progress is a monograph on Maximus the Confessor at the crossroad of philosophical and theological thought in late antiquity.

my knowledge the aspects of Maximus's teaching on which I focus here have not been discussed before.

First, it is important to keep in mind that not only Maximus the Confessor but also Sophronius of Jerusalem (whom Maximus called his "Abba") left an account of Christian reactions to the encounter with the Arabs/Muslims.[1] Sophronius of Jerusalem (patriarch from 634 to 638 or 639) led Christian Jerusalem's defense. After a long siege, and having received no support from Emperor Heraclius, in the winter of 637–638, he decided to surrender the city to the Arabs. The capitulation was received by Caliph Umar (634–644) and, according to the terms of surrender, the lives of Jerusalem's citizens were spared and the main Christian sacred places preserved. The coexistence of Christianity and Islam in the Holy Land began from that moment. For the most part, however, this article deals with Maximus's perception of the invasion rather than that of the Patriarch Sophronius.[2]

Maximus the Confessor's key text on this issue can be found in his letters, particularly in his "Didactic epistle" (Ep. 14)[3] addressed to Peter the Illustrious. He was an exarch of Africa who was sent to Egypt when Emperor Heraclius, in order to oppose the Arab invasion, was collecting troops throughout Northern Africa. As Jean-Claude Larchet argues, "this letter was written between 634 and 639. During this period Peter lived in Alexandria where he probably fulfilled a double mission, military and ecclesiastical."[4] Indeed, Peter was active not only in the military but also in ecclesiastical politics. This is clearly seen from the fact that Maximus addressed several letters to him from Carthage, where Maximus was then living (besides Ep. 14, there was a long Ep. 13,[5] written about 633). These letters were devoted almost entirely to questions of dogma, the foremost being polemics against the Monophysites.[6] The Monophysites' presence in Egypt and their enmity toward an Empire that often treated them harshly

[1] Initially I will use the contemporary name of this group; later I will use Maximus's own terminology.

[2] On this theme see Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*: *A Survey and Analysis of the Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin, 1997) 69–71. Maximus's and Sophronius's approaches to some points on the issue in question will be compared.

[3] Migne, PG 91.533B–544C. All translations from Migne are mine.

[4] Jean-Claude Larchet, introduction to *Maxime Le Confesseur*: *Lettres,* trans. and notes by Emmanuel Ponsoye (Paris: Cerf, 1998) 52, my translation.

[5] Migne, PG 91.509B–533A.

[6] At the high point of the polemics with the Monothelites in 642–643, Maximus sent Peter the 12th of his *Opuscula theologica et polemica* (Migne, PG 91.141A–146A), in which he explained how to treat Pyrrhus, the ex-patriarch of Constantinople who had been exiled to the Northern Africa. Since Pyrrhus was a heretic, Maximus told Peter not to treat him as a patriarch until he repented.

were among the most important factors in imperial politics of that time. In speaking about Maximus's correspondence with Exarch Peter (for whom Maximus probably was not only a counselor on questions of dogma but also a spiritual authority—a kind of a spiritual father), one needs to keep in mind that later during his trial (655), Maximus was accused of having "single-handedly betrayed Egypt, Alexandria, Pentapolis, Tripolis and Africa to the Saracens."[7] It was alleged that in his letter he dissuaded Peter from resistance against the Saracens with the aim of weakening the power of Emperor Heraclius.[8] Maximus rejected this accusation, pointing out to the accuser (John, a sacellarius of Peter), that he had no evidence for the existence of such a letter. Most probably, there really was no letter of this kind. Nevertheless, speaking objectively, both Sophronius and Maximus did oppose those official policies of Constantinople and the church hierarchy that supported the state and were aimed at achieving a union with the Monophysites. This issue seemed urgent in the context of the deterioration of the political and military situation in the Byzantine Empire. In 633, this union with the Monophysites-Theodosians was achieved by Cyrus, patriarch of Alexandria, on the basis of a Monoenergist interpretation of the expression from the *Corpus Areopagiticum*: "new theandric activity (energy)" of Christ was understood by Cyrus and the Monophysites as "single theandric activity." However, thanks to the efforts of Abba Sophronius (the future patriarch of Jerusalem), the spread of Monoenergism was, if not stopped, at least suspended by a *Psephos*, published by patriarch of Constantinople Sergius (633). The *Psephos* forbade the use of both Monoenergist and Dyoenergist expressions. Under the influence of the same Sergius, the next period in the unionist politics of Heraclius and his collaborators began in 638, when the Emperor published the Monothelite *Ekthesis*.[9]

Continuing opposition between the Dyophysites and the Monophysites in Egypt, particularly in Alexandria, was one of the factors that seriously weakened the Byzantines when they were confronted with an Arab invasion. However, Sophronius and Maximus, who strongly influenced ecclesiastical and state politics, were unswerving in their attitude toward the Monophysites.[10] In their view, Orthodox Christians must not accept any compromises that would be a distortion of their faith.

[7] Pauline Allen and Brownwen Neil, eds., *Maximus the Confessor and His Companions: Documents from Exile*, trans. Pauline Allen and Brownwen Neil (New York: Oxford University) 48–49.

[8] See Migne, PG 90.112A–B.

[9] See Allen and Neil, introduction to *Maximus the Confessor and His Companions* 2–18.

[10] This was probably one reason why Maximus was later accused of antistate activities.

Indeed, that part of Maximus's letter to Exarch Peter (i.e., Ep. 14) where he describes the new power emerging onto the stage of world history is devoted to the need for firmness in the true faith. Further description of events and Maximus's attitude toward them occurs later.

It is appropriate here, however, to note that Sophronius's and Maximus's activity, which at first glance appears harmful to the state, was in fact not harmful if one takes into consideration all the factors of Byzantine political life at the time. The Empire as a whole understood and constituted itself as Orthodox. That is why compromises in faith and distortion of Orthodoxy for the sake of achieving temporary political successes were fraught with other perils. Particularly, there was a threat of the separation of the whole Western part of the Empire together with Rome (which confessed Dyoenergism) from its Eastern part. This separation did actually occur after the victory of unionist ecclesial politics of the Monophysites in Constantinople. In fact, the Empire was to a great extent preserved by Orthodoxy. Therefore, although the propaganda of Sophronius and Maximus at first glance appeared unpatriotic, ultimately it helped preserve the Empire. The Empire returned to Dyoenergism and the Orthodoxy that was so fiercely defended by these saints (as well as by the church in the West in general) at the Sixth Ecumenical Council (680–681).

I now turn to the text of Ep. 14 itself, where we see the outstanding Byzantine theologian's reaction to the Arab Muslims' invasion of the Empire. The first thing that merits special attention in this text is the place where Maximus describes the enemies invading the Empire. In a comparatively long fragment dedicated to the Arab invasion,[11] Maximus devotes only half a sentence to the Arabs and does not name them: "We see a tribe of barbaric inhabitants of the desert, which is sweeping over a foreign land as if it were their own—indomitable, cruel animals, human beings only according to their outward appearance, ravaging a civilized state."[12] Here Maximus speaks only in terms that contrast a barbarian invasion with a civilization; he does not at all discuss the faith of the invaders. Most probably he did not know anything for certain about their religion.[13] I should note that, in general, Maximus's descriptions of the Arabs are more moderate, even laconic, compared to Sophronius's. The patriarch of Jerusalem speaks not only about the barbaric character of the Arabs, about their cruelty and ferocity, but also

[11] Migne, PG 91.540–544. [12] Migne, PG 91.540A.

[13] See Karl Heinz Öhlig, "Hinweise auf eine neue Religion in der christlichen Literatur unter islamischer Herrschaf," in *Der frühe Islam*: *Eine historisch-kritische Rekonstruktion anhand zeitgenössischer Quellen* (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007) 241.

about their impiety, their ungodly character, and their opposition to God. He calls those who fight against Christ and his church the "abomination of desolation" (Dan 9:27), following their leader, the devil, whom they imitate.[14] Thus, Sophronius underscores the anti-Christian element in his characterization of the invaders much more than Maximus, who in Ep. 14 directs this kind of condemnation against the Jews (as I indicate below). It is difficult to determine whether Sophronius knew anything about Islam as a religion. In any case, Maximus, being farther from the Arab troops, might have known about the anti-Christian character of Islam only in general terms, and did not find it necessary to speak about the religion of the Arabs.

As well as the brief mention of "barbaric inhabitants of the desert" in the fragment dedicated to the Arab invasion, the text contains two themes: the role the Jews played in the outcome of these historical events and the lessons the Orthodox Christians (principally Exarch Peter) needed to learn from what happened. Maximus's attitude toward the Jews and his evaluation of their role in supporting the Arabs has been already studied in several articles.[15] For my purposes here, it is sufficient to note that Maximus, in a long anti-Jewish passage, emphasizes the Jews' rejection of the Christian gospel, their readiness to support any anti-Christian force, and their general animosity toward the Christians. Furthermore, he charges, by their deeds and probably also by their faith, the Jews "announce the coming of the Antichrist."[16]

I will revisit this Jewish theme later. Here it is appropriate to discuss Maximus's admonition regarding the lessons to be learned by Christians from the disaster brought about by the invasion of the barbaric hordes supported by the Jews, the fundamental enemies of the Christians. According to Maximus, disasters befell the Christians as a consequence of "many of our sins."[17] He sees these sins first of all as Christians "not conducting themselves 'in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ'" (Phil 1:27).[18] This meant they were violating the commandment to love and giving themselves over to passions.

[14] See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* 69–71.

[15] See Carl Laga, "Judaism and Jews in Maximus Confessor's Works: Theoretical Controversy and Practical Attitude," *Byzantinoslavica* 51 (1990) 177–88; Gilbert Dagron, "Juifs et Chrétiens dans l'Orient du VIIe siècle," *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991) 39–41; Grigory I. Benevich, "Po Povodu Okonchaniya Pisma VIII Prp. Maxima Ispovednika," in *Maxim Ispovednik: Pisma* (SPb.: Izd-vo SPbGU, 2007) 265–78.

[16] Migne, PG 91.540B.

[17] Migne, PG 91.541B.

[18] Ibid.

Second and more importantly, in terms of the problems being addressed in this article, Maximus charges that Christians were sinning by their hesitation on questions of faith:[19]

> Let us be on the alert and pray, so that our "hearts will not be weighted down with surfeiting and drunkenness" (Lk 21:34). For surfeiting is a hesitation in the word of faith, and finally a persecution [of the true faith], and drunkenness is a rejection of that reason given us by nature, which naturally brings [us] to the true knowledge of beings, when a soul because of languor bows down under the blows of trials and, being darkened, hesitates in faith, as I have said.[20]

Clearly, in the context of being a "Didactic epistle," this letter, as well as Ep. 13 written previously, was primarily dedicated to polemics with the Monophysites from the Chalcedonian position. By hesitations in faith Maximus was referring to relations between the Orthodox Christians and the Monophysites in Alexandria. (Here one needs to remember particularly Cyrus, a patriarch of Alexandria who had formed the aforementioned Monoenergist union with the Monophysites in 633 and still remained in his position.) Most likely Maximus had in mind Cyrus's readiness to compromise his faith, thereby violating Orthodox teaching for the sake of political goals. This tendency was radically opposed by Sophronius and Maximus. Here Maximus entreats his addressee, who was responsible for the military and ecclesiastical policy in Egypt and Northern Africa, to reject any compromises in faith, even in such a tragic situation as that of the Orthodox Christians in Egypt.

Moreover, Maximus calls for Peter to stand firm in faith by not allowing any hesitation and by not seeking a purely human way out of the present dire situation. Instead, Peter was to address God in prayer, seeking from him confirmation and perseverance in the true faith:

> If we pray and be on the alert, our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ will be confirmed in us, for we will see, and in our own experience perceive, a realization of his prophecy, and will not in the least be surprised and hesitate in our souls as if we undergo something that is not in accord with what had been promised, but we will obtain an even stronger faith, seeing how indeed the Lord's prophecy is realized.[21]

The prophecy mentioned here, which Maximus sees as being fulfilled now, probably refers to some eschatological prophecies of the New Testament about the world's departure from faith on the threshold of the coming of the Antichrist, and about hardships that would befall all faithful

[19] Sophronius in several sermons also calls attention to Christians' responsibility for the Arabs' success, although he speaks about this issue only in general terms, without emphasizing hesitation in faith as a main sin of the Christians (see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It* 69–71).

[20] Migne, PG 91.541C.

[21] Migne, PG 91.541D.

Christians in general (see, e.g., Mt 24:6–24 and Lk 18:7–8). It is not accidental that when Maximus writes about the Jews, he not only speaks of the general anti-Christian character of Judaism but also says that their religion anticipates the coming of the Antichrist. Finally, in concluding the passage dedicated to the need for firmness in faith, Maximus repeats his message that having the correct understanding of current events as fulfilling prophecy will serve to make faith stronger:

> Now, if the realization of predicted things may bring about the strengthening of faith, we must also strengthen our faith because of the present events, finding that truth had been spoken, and confess God before men, not being afraid of death, so that he will confess us before the Father [see Lk 12:8] and receive us as saved by a good confession.[22]

What does all this have to do with the question posed at the beginning of this article about defining the place of Islam in relation to the Christian confessions? Maximus does not say anything here concerning Islam, about which, as a religion, he most probably knew very little. Moreover, if one supposes that Maximus spoke only of eschatological prophecies in his letter to Exarch Peter, one needs to acknowledge that they were not fulfilled. Thus the whole passage dedicated to these prophecies seems to be groundless. Nevertheless, I would suggest another approach to the problem of the relation between Islam and Christian confessions of that time, an approach that will allow the elaboration of a new vision of what Maximus wrote in his letter to Exarch Peter. Indeed, already an analysis of the letter's text would suggest a thought that Maximus did not openly express (most likely because his knowledge of the anti-Christian character of the invaders was vague). The emergence of Islam onto the stage of world history was the appearance of an alternative that was a kind of antipode to the religious ideology of the ruling Chalcedonians in the Byzantium, who were prone to unite with heretics and to distort the Orthodox teaching. From a purely religious point of view, the emergence of such a force in such a situation could be treated as God's punishment. Indeed, Maximus spoke in his letter to Peter about punishment for hesitation in faith, probably meaning Cyrus's Monoenergistic union and other such tendencies.

This thesis will be clearer if one compares some particular features of the Monothelite teaching (which became official doctrine in Constantinople and a basis for the union with the Monophysites) with some important features of Islamic teaching. The principal feature of Monothelite doctrine asserts that the Logos (being a member of the Holy Trinity) is the only source of Christ's will, and that his human nature does not have any will of its own, being entirely and in all circumstances of Christ's life moved only

[22] Migne, PG 91.544A.

by his divinity. Instead of this teaching, Maximus elaborated his doctrine of the two natural wills in Christ, saying: "God himself . . . having become a man . . . wills not only as God according to his Godhead, but also as a man according to his humanity."[23] The Monothelites did not acknowledge this human natural will in Christ. During Maximus's disputation with one of the Monothelite leaders, ex-patriarch of Constantinople Pyrrhus, the latter rhetorically asked, Did not "[Christ's] flesh move according to the command (*nevmati*) of the Logos, united with it?"[24] Maximus replied that this kind of interaction between God and man was characteristic for the prophets of the Old Testament who were moved according to God's command: "According to his command Moses and David were moved, as well as all who by abandoning the human corporeal qualities became capable of containing in themselves God's activity [energy]."[25] However, Maximus did not stop with this objection.[26] He immediately added that human nature in Christ has its natural will, which is assimilated to the hypostasis of the Logos incarnate as its own, along with God's will. (He cites the Gethsemane prayer as a well-known example that reveals Christ's human will.)

Turning now to Islam, we see that in this religion the highest pattern in the "system" of God-man relations is not the Logos of God incarnate, but the prophet. Jesus (Nabi Isa) is one of the greatest prophets. The prophets, at whose apex is Mohammed, receive God's revelation and communicate it to the people. At the same time, Islam is not one of the Christian confessions (like Monothelitism, Nestorianism, or even Arianism) but properly speaking it is another religion. For Christians, this was not clear in the beginning, but after a time it became obvious. As was mentioned previously, Islam emerged onto the stage of world history at the very moment when the teachings of Monoenergism and Monothelitism were accepted officially in Byzantium. Christ's human natural will is almost rejected in these teachings, especially in Monothelitism; and Christ's flesh is understood as being moved by God's command, that is, by God's will without any involvement of human will.

It is important to note in this context that, according to Maximus, even in the moments when Christ worked miracles and his flesh was moved by his divinity, his human natural will did not disappear but was entirely submitted to God's will, did not appear apart from it, and yet was always preserved as a human will.[27] As for the prophets, in saying that they were moved by

[23] Migne, PG 91.297A.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Its aim was probably to emphasize that prophets were moved by God from without, whereas in Christ, God's will is intrinsic.
[27] See Maximus, *Ambigua* 7: Migne, PG 91.1076B–C.

God's energy, Maximus certainly did not deny that they had a human will; he merely granted that this will was submitted entirely to God.[28]

In emerging onto the stage of world history in the seventh century, Islam represented a religion in which the prophet, not the incarnate God-Logos, stands at the center of God-man relations. This religion appeared exactly at that moment when in Byzantium the teaching about God's incarnation was corrupted to the extent that church officials began to profess the absence of a human will in Christ, which Maximus rightly treated as a core element of human nature. In fact, rejection of a human will in Christ meant denying that human nature had been taken by the Logos; thus it meant rejecting a true union of Godhead and humanity in Christ. At precisely this moment, Islam emerged onto the stage of world history. It constituted a new religion that rejected God's Incarnation as understood in Christianity and holds that man, namely, the prophets, appears at the center of God-man relations.

In his letter to Exarch Peter, Maximus paid considerable attention to the active role played by the Jews in the emergence of Islam. From his point of view, their spiritual role in the context of the times is clear. It is precisely in Judaism that the Incarnation, together with Christ as the long-awaited Savior and Messiah, is rejected. Maximus reminds his addressee about these facts, speaking about Judaism as anticipating the coming of the Antichrist (see 1 Jn 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 Jn 1:7). Thus, though he did not write about Islam as a religion (because he did not know about it), Maximus appears to be entirely right in his description of the events to have paid attention more to Judaism than to "barbarians from the desert." Indeed, it was a refusal to believe in the Christian understanding of the incarnation (as well as the doctrine of the Trinity[29]) that appeared to be the spiritual basis of the new religion and became a common denominator between it and Judaism, at the same time separating it from the main Christian confessions of that time, in spite of Islam's veneration of Jesus (in contrast with the Jews) as a great prophet.

Thus, among different worldviews then confronting each other, a new one appeared that can be treated as a kind of antithesis to Byzantine Monotheletism. The measure of this opposition in Islam, as well as the character of relations in the Muslim God-man "system" in comparison to the Monothelete model, needs future detailed investigation; this would require collaboration with a specialist in Islam. The present article aims only

[28] I would like to express my gratitude to Arkadi Choufrine, who drew my attention to this aspect of Maximus's teaching and discussed this article with me.

[29] The absence in Islam of such paradoxical and complicated teachings as that on the unity of the divine and human natures, as well as that on the Trinity, most probably promoted the spreading of this religion among "inhabitants of the desert." At the same time, this rapid expansion of the faith of the prophet was one of the reasons for the military success of the Muslim-Arabs.

to pose this question and, if nothing else, to place the emergence of Islam preliminarily into the context of christological polemics in Byzantium.

Regardless of how this question is solved from a viewpoint of the conjectured influence of Christian and Christian-Jewish sects in Arabia or of the possible influence of the Jews on the formation of early Islam, one may state that Islam (which put a prophet, i.e., a human being, in the center of the God-man relations) appeared as a radical antipode to Monothelite Christianity (which essentially undermined the basis of the teaching on the acceptance by God the Logos of a human nature). From the Christian perspective, the emergence of Islam and the subsequent defeat of the Empire of Heraclius by the Muslims may be treated as a kind of divine punishment that was not only military but also spiritual. I have shown that Maximus in his letter to Exarch Peter was close to such a view, although he did not know the doctrine of Islam and did not formulate this view explicitly.

Given the defeat of the Empire under Heraclius, and Byzantium's subsequent rejection of the Monothelete heresy and return to Orthodoxy, one may say that from a religious point of view (the discourse found in Maximus) further continuation of the existence of the Monothelete heresy as the Empire's official ideology was not pleasing in God's sight. Therefore even the emergence of a new non-Christian religion, which had captured wide territories once belonging to Byzantium, was not as abhorrent as the survival of a violated teaching of Orthodoxy, the official religion (and ideology) of an allegedly Orthodox empire.

As a result of Islam's emergence onto the stage of world history, the Monothelete Empire of Heraclius suffered the worst defeats in the history of the Byzantine Empire to that point in time. The strategy to unite all Christians on the basis of Monoenergism and Monotheletism, which had been conceived by Heraclius in collaboration with Sergius of Constantinople and Cyrus of Alexandria, was just becoming a reality when it was ruined by the Arab invasion.[30] The Nestorians and Monophysites, who traditionally lived in Persia, Syria, and Egypt, and recently expressed a wish to unite on this basis with the Byzantines, quickly came under Muslim rule. As for Byzantium itself, after suffering major defeat, it eventually returned to Orthodoxy (Dyoenergism and Dyotheletism). It was formally united with the Western part of the Empire, and Orthodoxy was reestablished by the Third Council of Constantinople (680–681). This was definitely championed by Maximus and his companions, even though his role in the preservation of Orthodoxy was not acknowledged by the Fathers of the Council.[31]

[30] See John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1989) 342.

[31] See Grigory I. Benevich and Arkadi M. Choufrine, "Delo Maxima," in *Maxim Ispovednik: Polemika S Origenizmom I Monoenergizmom* (SPb.: Izd-vo SPbGU, 2007) 118–39.