

# God and the Universe

A study of the patristic tradition and  
the thought of Teilhard de Chardin,  
including contrary arguments and  
the resulting schism

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## Preface

I realised in the 1950's that the universe was in movement towards union with God and that the Universal Christ encompassed that movement and its goal. I knew no one else who shared my view or had written about it. However, in 1970, I read Teilhard's *Phenomenon of Man* and was introduced to St Maximus through Vladimir Lossky's *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. The compatibility of the approach of the two writers was obvious. However, I was unable to find any previous adequate comparison of their works. I was unqualified for the task of making my own comparison as I was an engineer and not a theologian and had an approach to theology which was both conservative and ecumenical, an approach which will be untenable to some. Nevertheless, in the 1990's I began the long task of accumulating all the necessary works of St Maximus and Teilhard and their commentaries on them in the hope that I might eventually be able to make such a comparison. It is hoped that this study will be a catalyst for further works on the subject.

The first few chapters of this study is an attempt to explain what is truly beyond words. Such attempts are essentially imperfect but the study will probably attract particular criticism because its findings are similar to those of Teilhard de Chardin whose works were severely criticised by many. However, even if the study helps even a few to express God and His universe, it will be worth while.

I am grateful to the British Teilhard Association for loaning several of their books not in my own collection. I am also grateful to those who supported my task including Celia Deanne-Drummond, Alexei Nesteruk and Ben Fulford.

## Introduction

We would expect that in a relationship between an infinite God and a relatively finite universe, God would influence the universe. If there was no influence by God upon the universe, we must doubt the existence of God. If the universe was influenced by God, it would move differently from what it would act without God. Moreover, God and the universe would work together to some extent and we would expect that the resulting movement would bring God and the universe closer together than further apart. The movement would have a direction towards closer unity with God but like all true relationships that unity would maintain the distinction between God and the universe.

The key to understanding a universe which relates to God is therefore based upon its movement with God towards a goal of union with Him. The study of such a universe is therefore centred upon eschatology. The term eschatology is based upon the Greek word *eschaton* (ἔσχατον) is often defined as the study of the ‘final destiny’ of humankind. In the patristic tradition, that destiny is the union between God and the universe as God ‘gathers ... all things ... to Himself.’<sup>1</sup> In the patristic tradition, eschatology includes consideration of the ‘destiny of all of creation’<sup>2</sup> but does not exclude ‘recent experience.’ Eschatology is also considered as qualifying ‘the character of theology as a whole’<sup>3</sup> as it ‘locates the truth of things only in the future.’<sup>4</sup> This study therefore regards the study of eschatology as not only the goal of the universe but also the *movement* towards that goal and how that movement can commence.

We need to research writings of those who specialise on eschatology. There are two writers in particular that fulfil that requirement, St Maximus the Confessor (580-662 CE) and Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955 CE). The works of St Maximus have a consistent quality and so, when John of Damascus outlined the essence of its theology in his *Fide Orthodoxa*, he included the eschatology of St Maximus. Also, modern writers on the Byzantine tradition such as Lossky,<sup>5</sup> Metropolitan Kallistos,<sup>6</sup> and Meyendorff include St Maximus as one of its fathers with Meyendorff describing St Maximus ‘as the real father of Byzantine theology.’<sup>7</sup> As St Maximus lived in the period of the seven ecumenical councils agreed by east and west,<sup>8</sup> we categorise his writings as being part of not only the Byzantine tradition but also the patristic tradition.

There were differences between the two writers. St Maximus was an accomplished theologian within his tradition. While ‘the religious thought of ... Teilhard (was) fundamentally eschatological,’<sup>9</sup> he was not a systematic theologian and he was at odds with the authorities of his western tradition. We therefore expect to find inconsistencies in

<sup>1</sup> St Maximus, *Myst 1*; PG 91; trans. CWS-MC, p. 186

<sup>2</sup> John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (Oxford, A. R. Mowbray & Co Ltd., 1975) p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> St Maximus, *Eccl hier 3.2*; PG 4, 137D (Authorship in doubt); trans. ZIZ-CO, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge and London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1973)

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Ware (Metropolitan Kallistos), *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1993)

<sup>7</sup> Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 37

<sup>8</sup> Ending in 787 with the Second Council of Nicaea. The later *Filioque* dispute between east and west came to a head in 867.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Faricy, ‘Teleology, Prophecy and Apocalyptic in Teilhard’s eschatology’, *TR* 15.1, 1980. Also, Bernard Delfgaauw, *Evolution: The Theory of Teilhard de Chardin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) p. 93, and Henri de Lubac, *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Collins, 1967) p. 30.



Teilhard's works but the consistency of St Maximus' works would help to identify them. On the other hand, Teilhard approached his eschatology from a modern scientific viewpoint which could perhaps help to interpret the patristic tradition from a modern viewpoint.

For the study to be relevant to the western world today, we need to ascertain how the patristic understanding of God and the universe relates to western Christianity so that this task is an essential part of the study. It is realised that western Christianity may not be united on its view on this subject and further works may be required to explore the various viewpoints.

## Background

### *The Life of St Maximus the Confessor (580-662)*

According to the Greek Life,<sup>10</sup> St Maximus was born into an aristocratic family in Constantinople in 580. He was well educated and became the first secretary of the Emperor Heraclius,<sup>11</sup> possibly around 610. However, after a few years, St Maximus resigned his post to enter a monastery at Chrysopolis (Scutari) on the opposite shore of the Bosphorus in 613 to 614. By 618, St Maximus had acquired a disciple named Anastasius. In 624 or 625, St Maximus left Chrysopolis for the monastery of St George at Cyzicus (Erdek) further south on the south coast of the Sea of Marmara. St Maximus and his fellow monks left Cyzicus when the Persians laid siege to Constantinople in 626. He may have stayed briefly in Cyprus and Crete but, by about 630, he was in Africa living in a monastery in Carthage under the Abbot St Sophronius.<sup>12</sup>

Following Sophronius, St Maximus took up the cause of dyothelitism against Monothelism. At that time, the See of Rome supported dyothelitism but the Emperor Heraclius and his successor Constans II (641-668) both supported Monothelism. St Maximus therefore naturally turned to Rome for support for his campaign against that heresy. He also, perhaps foolishly, defended the memory of Pope Honorius I (625-638) from the charge of being Monophysite.

In July 645 Gregory the Patrician (*patrikios*), the governor of the African province and a friend of Maximus, arranged a public disputation in Carthage between St Maximus and Pyrrhus, the Patriarch of Constantinople deposed in 641, as a result of which Pyrrhus went to Rome to abjure his Monothelite heresy although he latter returned to it about 647.

In 646, St Maximus followed Pyrrhus to Rome. In 647, in order to settle the Monothelite controversy, Emperor Constans II issued a decree called the *Typos* which had been written by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Paul II (641-.653). Unfortunately, the *Typos* still favoured Monothelism. In 649, while St Maximus was still in Rome, Pope St Martin I (649-655) convened a council at the Lateran which condemned the *Typos*. The council also anathematized Paul II and many others. In 653, St Martin was arrested by the imperial exarch in Rome and banished to the Cheronese, where he was starved to death.

St Maximus remained in Rome until, after opposing the *Typos* before an imperial legate, he was also arrested and taken to Constantinople. Even though he was then 75 years old, he was put on trial on a charge of conspiring against the Empire. As he supported the See of Rome against the *Typos*, he was accused of condemning the See of Constantinople. He replied, 'I condemn no one; but I would rather lose my life than depart from the least point of faith.' He was exiled to Bizya, in Thrace, where he suffered greatly from cold, hunger and neglect. After some months, a commission was sent to interview him, headed by Theodosius, Bishop of Caesarea in Bithynia. Maximus so eloquently demonstrated to them the two natures in Christ and the depravity of keeping silence on the true faith that Theodosius was convinced, gave the Confessor money and some clothes (which had been taken away by the Bishop of Bizya), and promised that he would submit to the Roman See. St Maximus was then removed to a monastery at Phegium, to which came Theodosius of

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<sup>10</sup> *Vita ac Certamen*, PG 90, col. 68A-109B.

<sup>11</sup> 610-641.

<sup>12</sup> St Sophronius, 560-638, Patriarch of Jerusalem, 634-638.

Caesarea again with another deputation, offering honours from the emperor if he would accept the *Typos*. Maximus reminded Theodosius of his promise, which he had ratified ‘on the holy gospels, on the cross, and on the image of the *Theotokos* (Θεοτόκος),’ to which the bishop could only reply, ‘What could I do? The Emperor took another view.’ Maximus remained firm; he was struck and spat upon, his few possessions were taken away from him, and the next day he was taken to Perberis, where his two friends and supporters, Anastasius the Abbot and Anastasius the Apocrisarius, were already in captivity.

Here they remained in great hardship and distress for six years, and they were brought back to Constantinople to appear before a tribunal. All three were condemned, and were deprived of their tongues and their right hands, pilloried in each of the 12 quarters of the city, and imprisoned for life. After a terrible journey to Skhemaris, near Batum on the Black Sea, St Maximus survived only a few weeks.

Not only did St Maximus continue the work of the Cappadocian Fathers, St Basil of Caesarea (329-379), St Gregory of Nazianzus (the Theologian) (329-391), St Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) but he secured it from deviation into neo-Platonism by his opposition to Origenism. He also supported the philosophical theology of Pseudo-Dionysius which he gave an Orthodox Christian interpretation. He was also influenced by Evagrius despite the latter's Origenist views. In modern times, his works were published by Migne in the *Patrologia Graeca*, principally in volumes 90 and 91.

His feast day is 13th August.

#### *The Life of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955)*

Teilhard was born in 1881 at the Château de Sarcenat near Orcines in the Massif Central. He received a Jesuit secondary education and became a Jesuit in 1899, entering the novitiate and, in 1900, the juniorate and took his first vows in 1901. He received a degree in letters at Caen University in 1902. Between 1902 and 1905 he studied philosophy in Jersey. He then taught in Cairo for three years. His theological studies took place at Hastings between 1908 and 1912 and he was ordained a priest in 1911. For the following two years, he received his scientific training in Paris. Between 1914 and 1919, he served in the army medical corps as a stretcher bearer at the front becoming a corporal in 1915. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre in 1915 and the Médaille Militaire in 1917. Between 1919 and 1920, he was at the Sorbonne for a degree in natural science. He then taught geology at the Institut Catholique in Paris for three years.

A tension arose between Teilhard and his religious superiors regarding a paper he wrote on original sin. According to Grau, the paper was the *Note on Some Possible Historical Representations of Original Sin*, 1922.<sup>13</sup> The critical point was the western doctrine of original guilt. As a result, Teilhard was unable to publish his works during his lifetime and many opportunities to lecture in academic circles were forbidden.

In 1923, the Institut Catholique sent Teilhard to China to assist in the excavations for fossils at Tien-tsin for a year as a palaeontologist. On his return to China in 1926, Teilhard was informed that he could not continue as a teacher at the Institut. In the years between 1927 and 1929, he lectured in Paris and spent some time in Ethiopia. He returned to China for another 18 months, during which a skull of *Sinanthropus Pekinensis* (*Homo Erectus*) was

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph A. Grau, *Morality and the Human Future in the Thought of Teilhard de Chardin* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated Presses, 1976) p. 316n.

found at Chou-Kou-Tien, returning to Paris in the autumn of 1930. After lecturing in France and visiting the United States, in 1931, he returned to China making extensive geological explorations there and also in India, Burma and Java as well as visiting the United States and France. In 1933, he was informed that he could not take up any post in Paris. In 1938, he visited Japan, New York and then Paris returning to China in the following year but was interned there and did not return to Paris until 1946. In 1947, he was not allowed to take up a post of professor at the College de France. In 1951, he went to New York for the American Foundation for Anthropological Research and remained there until his death in 1955 except for visits overseas including one to South Africa in 1953. After his death, his more religious works were collected and published as thirteen volumes in the 1960s and 1970s.

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