Introduction

Dogma versus "spirituality": a problem in the thought of Maximus the Confessor

Maximus the Confessor (580–662) was a Palestinian monk whose combustive historical era, committed doctrinal reflection, and loud and influential voice took him on a turbulent career of traveling and writing around the Mediterranean. His career ended in his eighties with mutilation and death for the sake of a christological position subsequently vindicated as orthodox. Although the evidence is partial and ambiguous, the story of his life has been retold with increasing clarity in recent years.[1] The primary object of this work is not the history and details of this man's unusually influential monastic career. Rather, this work will take up the more focused task of deciphering something of his theological epistemology, by which I mean his conception of what enables knowledge of God.[2] Specifically, the aim of this work is to identify and examine the intriguing connection between *imitation* and *knowledge* that Maximus upholds throughout his written oeuvre. From his earliest to his latest works, I will suggest, Maximus proposes that knowledge of God comes about as the knower achieves a likeness to God. However, to claim, as I am, that there is any enduring characteristic of Maximus' epistemology is somewhat

1. The best recent summaries of Maximus' life and historical context are: Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, 143–70; Allen, "Life and Times of Maximus," 3–18; Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor*, 9–63.

2. My anachronistic use of the term "epistemology" throughout this study is intended to share none of the skeptical anxieties associated with the so-called problem of "foundationalism" in the modern period.

counter-intuitive in light of one dramatic historical shift in his career. It is worth highlighting this shift at the outset.

Changes of style in the Confessor's works are not themselves surprising because, as commentators have observed, Maximus lived a busy life of traveling and networking and his writings are, on the whole, "occasional";[3] his teaching and philosophical claims appear in action, in response to particular and varying situations or calls, rather than in summary. However, from around 633, Maximus became engaged in a particularly protracted and complicated occasion of christological conflict, in response to which he drastically and forevermore turned his communicative style and, apparently, his approach to knowledge into something much more dogmatic, polemical, and scholastic than can be found in his early works of exegesis and spirituality.[4] It was this engagement in the intensifying christological conflict of his day that earned him the posthumous title "Confessor" and that divides what I will call his "early" and "late" writings. In its nascent form, the conflict was over the question of whether Christ had one divine-and-human "activity" (ἐνέργεια), or two "activities" (ἐνεργεῖαι)—one divine and one human. In the late 630s, the terms of the debate shifted from "activities" to "wills" (θελήματα), and the issue then became whether Christ possessed one divine-and-human "will," or two "wills"—one divine and one human. Maximus became a pioneer and spokesman for the latter side of the debate, labeled by scholars the "dyoenergist" and "dyothelite" position, the opposing side being "monenergist" and "monothelite."

As Maximus engaged in this christological conflict his writings took on a new and permanent character, a character that has caused some anxiety amongst scholars, for reasons perhaps best articulated by the historian Averil Cameron. Cameron highlights a growing obsession in sixth- and seventh-century Byzantine Christianity with *disputation* and *definition* as the key modes and literary forms for ordering knowledge.[5] From this rhetorical observation she characterizes this period of Christian discourse as an "attempt to find a new systematization of knowledge,"[6] a new structure of "certainty" in the face of the insecurity and huge social

3. Andrew Louth was perhaps the first to characterize Maximus' writings like this. See Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 15, 42.

4. Louth, "Dogma and Spirituality," 199–200.

5. See Cameron, "Disputations," 91–108, and "Byzantium and the Past," 250–76.

6. Cameron, "Disputations," 100.

and political collapses caused by invading Persian and Arab armies.[7] The rhetoric of Christian writers of the period, among whom Cameron includes Maximus as a perfect example, shows that these Christians set out to produce a "total discourse,"[8] "complete systems of knowledge" in which "Christian history and Christian authority is defined . . . as consisting in the Scriptures, the Councils and the works of the approved, or select, Fathers. All necessary human knowledge is to be found and confined in that chain of authority."[9] Of Maximus' works, the late writings on Christology most clearly fit Cameron's portrait of a new Byzantine system of Christian knowledge-management.

The cause of consternation for the reader of Maximus is not the fact of discrepancy in style or content between his early and late works. As already noted, such differences are not themselves surprising or problematic. The problem is the apparent discrepancy between two approaches to knowledge and how to manage it. In Maximus' early exegetical and spiritual works, knowledge emerges through improvising, through provisional exploration, and is regulated and authenticated by ascetic practice and the language and imagery of the Bible; in the late works, by contrast, knowledge arrives as the heavily jargonized and technical product of logical argument, severe polemic, and slavish recourse to a small selection of patristic citations. The hard discrepancy is not between Maximus' early and late works *per se*, but, as Louth articulates it, between "dogma and spirituality." Although Louth aims to collapse this distinction by showing that these two modes of knowledge-management in fact harmoniously inhere, he does not quite fulfil his proposal, and instead discourses on two related but not ultimately relevant points (that "intellect" and "desire" are not opposed for Maximus, and that his early and late works share a philosophical vocabulary).[10] A more promising attempt to reconcile Maximus' diverging approaches to knowledge in his early and late works has recently been offered by Paul Blowers. Blowers attempts to qualify Cameron's thesis in a way that can hold together Maximus' early and late works. He argues that Maximus' later christological polemical works—his works of *disputation* and *definition*—rest upon his long prior monastic career of spiritual and ascetic reflection. By the time Maximus

7. Cameron, "Disputations," 107.
8. Cameron, "Byzantium and the Past," 269 (see also 255).
9. Cameron, "Disputations," 106.
10. Louth, "Dogma and Spirituality," 197–208.

turned his hand to the christological conflicts of his day, Blowers argues, he held a "charismatic authority" that was itself a crucial ingredient in the Christian validity structure of his day.[11] In essence, Maximus' earlier spiritual works and ascetic enterprise earned him the authority to adopt a dryer and more abstracted epistemological procedure in his later christological works. I find Blower's theory compelling, but he does not show how it is grounded in the texts themselves.

It is in fact Cameron herself, in a later article, who comes closest to offering the more nuanced way forward that Blowers is feeling towards, taking serious account of Maximus' identity as a monk and spiritual authority. Cameron's new suggestion is, however, no less acerbic and suspicious than her previous approach. Cameron argues that the "competitive process of system construction" and "persistent impulse towards definition" of Christian writing in Maximus' period relied upon another crucial ingredient: "ascetic discourse." By this Cameron simply means forms of discourse that express "ascetic ideas" and use ascetic "vocabulary."[12] Cameron says that Christian asceticism by "its very nature implied discipline as well as certainty," and "allowed no overt challenge, no possibility of tolerance, no uncertainty." In this way, ascetic texts were perfectly suited to the task of forging an epistemological "closure" or total discourse that Cameron says characterized early Byzantine Christianity.[13] By this analysis, Maximus' early ascetic works and his late dogmatic works would in fact share the same structure of knowledge-management, not because his late dogmatic works are ascetically grounded, but the opposite: because his early ascetic works were in fact authoritarian and dogmatic in the first place.

The present work began as an attempt to read Maximus' late christological works, which are mainly letters, with both the methods of rhetorical analysis of a Byzantinist like Cameron and with the eye of a patristics scholar like Blowers, more sensitive to theological and spiritual themes. I have found that if one listens to Maximus' late letters slowly and fully in this way—giving attention to their rhetorical form and aims as well as their spiritual integrity and purpose—a picture of Maximus' approach to knowledge emerges that is more convincing, textually based, and accurate than what Cameron and Blowers describe, an approach,

11. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor*, 65–66; 96–98.
12. Cameron, "Ascetic Closure," 147–61; 150.
13. Cameron, "Ascetic Closure," 156–57.

moreover, that pervades Maximus' whole career and spans the disparate genres of his writings. Let me outline this picture. In amongst the scholastic argument and dogmatic intoning of his late christological letters, the careful listener can in fact hear the Confessor addressing his reader with "ascetic discourse," in Cameron's words: all the themes of imitation, desire, renunciation, battle, and spiritual ascent are present that one would expect to find in any ascetic text. But Cameron's quite bleak and reductive picture of "ascetic discourse" as a means of furnishing epistemological "closure" is completely uncharacteristic of what we find here. Instead, what Maximus offers is an epistemological method that aims at *opening* his reader to a transformation of mind and life. As Maximus and his contemporaries busily write letters to each other, in desperate attempts to clarify christological technicalities and to discern and settle upon the most faithful ways to speak and think of the mystery of the incarnation, Maximus' voice can be heard again and again sounding the same guiding advice to his colleagues: our task of discernment not only involves scriptural and argumentative reflection, and adherence to our orthodox forebears, but, first and foremost, it grows out from the hard labor of *imitating* Christ the Word. Knowing divine things and drawing towards a right confession of Christian doctrine depends on imitation, on conformation in likeness to the object of knowledge. This ascetically grounded epistemological procedure is what Maximus' late christological works frequently propound, it is what ties them to his early spiritual and ascetic works, and it is the subject-matter of the present work.

Knowing-by-likeness

That doctrinal truth is discerned by likeness or imitation is a broad patristic truism.[14] By this model, knowers know by becoming like their object of knowledge. Indeed, this is an ancient maxim of Greek philosophy,

14. Perhaps the clearest earlier example comes in the conclusion of Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, a passage that we will look at in the first chapter. In Latin Christianity, Lewis Ayres and Rowan Williams have both argued that Augustine paints a similar picture, where Christ-likeness is the condition for understanding and assenting to the mystery of the incarnation (Ayres, "Christology as Contemplative Practice," 190–211; Williams, "Augustine's Christology," 176–89). In Williams' summary, "there can be no accurate discussion of the incarnation that is not itself incarnationally modeled," that is, modeled by "humility" in particular (188).

classically summarized by Aristotle in the words "like is known by like."[15] But it is something worth studying in Maximus in particular because this epistemological approach permeates his work yet has not been identified or elucidated before. On the one hand, it is scattered through Maximus' early ascetic works, appearing in tried and tested as well as original ways. On the other hand, and even more intriguingly, Maximus puts this epistemology into action by building it into the rhetoric of many of his (early and late) letters: namely, through the rhetorical form of the epistolary praise address, whose recurring presence, consistent form, and epistemological and theological function have been ignored in Maximus scholarship until now. The aims of this project are (in order): to identify how this epistemological model entered early Christian discourse; to unpack its significance in Maximus' early works; and to highlight the crucial role it plays in the rhetoric and methodology of the Confessor's late christological letters.

I am aware that this angle of research sits somewhat strangely against the landscape of Maximus scholarship. On the one hand, there is little precedent for examining the epistemological assumption that like is known by like (from now I will simply call this a "likeness epistemology") in any early Christian thinkers, let alone in Maximus the Confessor. Classical scholars have long acknowledged a likeness epistemology amongst pre-Christian Greek thinkers. Scholars of early Christianity, however, whilst aware of it, have rarely analyzed it, despite its subtle or explicit presence in the thought of so many Christian thinkers, especially in the traditions of theology that spring from Clement and Origen of Alexandria. When it comes to Maximus, his theological epistemology has been studied in some depth, and has usually been presented as an aspect of his engulfing doctrine of "deification," whereby knowledge of God is one result of conformation to God. In this sense, by acknowledging deification as the foundation of Maximus' theological epistemology, commentators have often but obliquely acknowledged that his epistemology takes for granted something of the knowing-by-likeness model. But scholarship has shown no alertness to the shades and details of this generic epistemological pattern in Maximus, which are many and intriguing.

On the other hand, while Maximus' Christology has always drawn much attention for its *propositional content*,[16] the latter chapters of this

15. *De an.* 404B.

16. Perhaps the most detailed contemporary account of Maximus' Christology is offered by Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ*. For a briefer summary of Maximus'

study identify the *method* and *ascetic procedure* of his Christology.[17] I will be taking a new route into the Confessor's Christology by aiming to highlight how imitation largely constitutes, not just complements, his dogmatic christological method. This aspect of Maximus' Christology will be drawn out by treating his christological works for what they are: *letters*, and not systematic treatises, with rhetorical features and tactics that tell us a great deal about what Maximus thought he was doing in writing Christology.

In short, this work takes untrodden routes into the Confessor's thought. As a consequence, in researching and writing it I have had the pleasure of finding little to argue against and much to argue for, and I have also felt the exciting sense of finding a new object, a new aspect of the Confessor, that I hope will be a convincing addition to our current understanding of the man.

Order of the study

The present work will unfold in six chapters. Chapter 1 is an essay on how a likeness epistemology took hold in Christian thought. It will be shown that there were at least two distinct strands of the notion that "like is known by like" in pre-Christian Greek thought, one that was developed in philosophical and scientific discussions about how perception works, and another that belonged to the assumptions of allegorical interpreters about how hidden truth can be accessed through texts. This latter strand of the knowing-by-likeness motif is the one that most heavily influenced Christian thinkers, especially Clement and Origen of Alexandria, and that was in turn bequeathed to their theological successors, including Maximus.

Readers who would like to get to Maximus himself may begin at Chapter 2. This chapter focuses on the Confessor's early works, those written before he became involved in christological conflicts. I will begin

developed christological position in the context of neo-Chalcedonian Christology and politics, see Hovorun, "Maximus, a Cautious Neo-Chalcedonian."

17. For a good example of a similarly ascetically grounded christological method from the Christian East, see David Michelson's recent monograph on the monophysite christologian Philoxenos of Mabbug. Michelson argues that Philoxenos presents the knowledge of God and the discernment of doctrine as achievements marked and enabled by ascetic practice—but not, however, by *imitative* ascetic practice (Michelson, *The Practical Christology of Philoxenos*).

by pointing out that Maximus witnesses to the same likeness epistemology identified in Chapter 1 in the allegorical methods of Clement and Origen, and I will take some time to show that Gregory Nazianzen in particular mediated this epistemological tradition to Maximus. The remainder of the chapter will explore three original ways that a likeness epistemology appears in the Confessor's early writings. First, I will turn to the *Centuries on Love*, in which Maximus presents love as a condition for knowledge of God, who is Love himself. Secondly, the chapter will focus on the theme of knowing by "virtue." Maximus regularly suggests that virtue is a means of attaining knowledge of God, and I will argue that this is because, for him, "virtue" is the means of restoring human "likeness" to God, or indeed is itself "Godlikeness." Thirdly, we will explore some daring passages in which Maximus paints a picture of what I will call "unknowing-by-likeness": he suggests that it is possible for the believer's desire to stretch to imitate even God's unknowable attributes, and thereby grasp them in a comprehension that is beyond knowledge.

Chapter 3 establishes Maximus' doctrine of deification as a crucial conceptual foundation that enables him to take for granted and experiment with the knowing-by-likeness motif in the ways displayed in Chapter 2. Although there is much excellent scholarship on deification in Maximus, the topic has become sprawling and confusing in the secondary literature, so my first aim in this chapter will be to offer a tidy and straightforward definition of the doctrine. I will then proceed to identify two ways that Maximus' doctrine of deification grounds his likeness epistemology. On the one hand, in Maximus' mind deification is precisely an achievement of "likeness" to God, and in this sense "knowing-by-deification" is just as valid a summary of Maximus' epistemology as is "knowing-by-likeness." On the other hand, Maximus' doctrine of deification is defined by a rule of "proportion" (ἀναλογία is the key term). Although Maximus' concept or rule of "proportion" has hitherto been largely passed over by commentators, it is in fact a very commonly recurring logical habit or thought-pattern in the Confessor's works. This will be worth unpacking in detail, at least to make up for the lack of scholarly attention, but also because Maximus' rule of "proportion"—whereby God interacts with the creature "in proportion" to the creature's likeness to God—gives a deeper framework for his likeness epistemology. The second half of this chapter will transpose the discussion slightly: just as deification, identity with God by likeness, is the theological concept that undergirds Maximus' likeness epistemology, I will argue that Maximus'

notion of Christ "incarnating" himself in believers who imitate him provides the theological keystone for Maximus' later christological method, which will be the topic of the rest of the study.

The final three chapters explore how a likeness epistemology plays out in Maximus' later works of dogmatic Christology. These chapters together will assemble the single claim that, in his christological letters, Maximus consistently presents the imitation of Christ as a crucial condition for right understanding of the mystery of the incarnation. Just as in the early works "like is known by like," so in these late works christological doctrine is discerned by Christ-likeness. Chapter 4 makes the first steps towards this claim by identifying one of Maximus' favorite and unique rhetorical forms: the epistolary praise address. Maximus often begins his letters or sent works with praise of the recipient. I will explore how the form of these praise addresses, while reflecting many late-antique conventions of praise rhetoric, is unique to Maximus. I will also show that the function of these addresses is unique: Maximus often carefully composes his address to praise his recipient for imitating the very content that the letter will cover. In *Letter* 2, for example, which will be examined at length as a case study, Maximus begins by praising the addressees for the ways they display divine love in their lives, before he turns to the letter's subject: divine love itself. The rhetorical function of epistolary addresses like this is to persuade the listener of the letter's teachings, and Maximus thinks he can do so by praising his listener for already imitating and manifesting these teachings in their ascetic striving. The tactic of these praise addresses reveals something of the kind of epistemological endeavor that Maximus imagines himself and his readers to be undertaking: an endeavor in which the goal of correct understanding and confession of divine things comes nearer as one is shaped and assimilated to those divine things. "Like is known by like," in other words. The second case study considered in this chapter will be Maximus' *Second Letter to Thomas*. This letter also opens with a praise address, which exemplifies the same tactics of persuasion noted in *Letter* 2, but this time the content of the letter is christological. We will highlight how Maximus accordingly shifts his rhetorical aim, and now praises his addressee for imitating Christ and, indeed, the finer points of the christological doctrine that the letter communicates. Again, the rhetoric gives us a clue about how Maximus thinks doctrinal discernment works; Maximus prepares his reader to digest his christological teachings by first encouraging them to take up habits of Christ-like life. Here we will get our first glimpse of Maximus'

methodological assumption that christological doctrine is discerned by Christ-likeness.

Having established the form and epistemological function of Maximus' praise addresses, the fifth chapter will turn to more of the Confessor's christological letter addresses in order to unearth his assumptions about doctrinal discernment more fully. This discussion will be prefaced with two short explorations into two important pieces of Maximus' doctrinal vocabulary: "dogma" and "mystery." First, I will argue that in Maximus' wider works "dogma" (or "doctrine") is a piece of *ascetic* vocabulary, and that approaching Christian doctrines is an ascetic, rather than scholastic, enterprise. This makes some sense of Maximus' claims about the importance of imitation in discerning "dogma." Secondly, Maximus characterizes the endeavor of his christological letters with the language of "mystery," and I will argue that for him, as for his predecessors going right back to the ancient texts dealt with in Chapter 1, "mystery" labels not only a reality to be known, but a reality to have one's life shaped by. Something of the "knowing-by-likeness" theme belongs to the notion of "mystery" itself, in other words. Having set the stage by exploring these two pieces of doctrinal vocabulary, the chapter will turn to the christological letters, and especially their rhetorical praise addresses. I will argue that in these texts Maximus rhetorically encourages at least two broad shapes of Christ-likeness to his readers as epistemic aids: descending and ascending. He recommends virtues of descent and humility that imitate the Word's self-emptying into humanity, and he praises his readers for achievements of ascent and exposure to what is hidden, imitating the Word's own life with the Father and his hidden divinity.

In the sixth and final chapter we will follow this same procedure with the more specific aim of discovering what kinds of imitation Maximus recommends to his readers when it comes to grasping the mystery of Christ's two *wills*, or the "dyothelite" confession, in particular. In examining some of Maximus' dyothelite letters I will argue that, alongside virtues of descending and rising, Maximus sketches a third way of imitation for his readers to adopt: willing or desiring. I will point out that Maximus often prefaces his teaching on dyothelite Christology by praising his recipients' desire. By doing so he aids his dyothelite argumentation with the following tactic: he attempts to bring his reader to understand and confess that Christ had a human will totally obedient to the divine will (as Maximus' dyothelite position maintains), by exhorting them to

harmonize their own human wills with God's through a transformation of their desire.

At the heart of this study, then, is a neglected theme in Maximus' thought—that "like is known by like." This is an epistemological theme that is present throughout his early works and definitive of the method of his late works; and once we are aware of it, we can more easily read together these otherwise divergent regions of his thought. It is also a theme whose Christian origins are obscure, and the first task of this study is to cast some light on them.

All translations of Greek text in this study are my own unless otherwise indicated.