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Eschatology and final restoration (apokatastasis) in Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximos the Confessor

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The problem of the fate of evil in the last things and the question of whether the post-Apocalyptic equilibrium will allow for the restoration of the Devil, have been recurrent and quite controversial throughout Patristic tradition. The last judgment and the Second Coming of Christ signify the final victory of good over evil, but it is not always clear how this victory will take place. As several theologians keep repeating, it is always good to avoid narrow definitions for things we have no explicit knowledge or revelation about. The fairly recent discussion on the ancient view of the toll-houses has shown exactly the nature of the problem.

Nevertheless, the problem of the restoration of all is too important to put aside, even if it has to fall under speculative theology. This issue is closely connected with the views on the nature of evil. According to most accounts by the early Christian Fathers that have written on the nature of evil, (Athanasios, Basil, and Gregory of Nyssa for instance, but also Augustine), evil does not have a real existence of its own, even more so in the eschatological future; it exists as a deprivation or perversion of good, born from the exercise of the free will, and the jealousy of Satan. At any rate, evil was not created by God, and the final state of the cosmos cannot be compromised with the post-Apocalyptic existence of evil. At the same time, Christian and pagan writers alike, such as Origen, Plotinos, Gregory of Nyssa and Proklos, have described the tendency of the fallen creation to return to its original state in almost identical terms, pointing towards a future that will be even better than the original Paradise. Therefore, the fate of humanity and the fallen angels at that time is rather problematic.

Alexandrian theology in the second/third century starts a particularly Eastern theological strand of eschatology that leads all the way to Mark of Ephesus in the fifteenth, one which differs from most Western views if not necessarily and officially on the eternity of evil, at least on the question as to where this evil is to be found and therefore comes from – in doctrinal contrast to the views of Western theologians such as Abelard, who saw the torments of hell as a punishment very often more cruel than the sins that warranted it, in a place that had specifically been created by God for this purpose, as it was believed after Augustine. The ancient as well as the late Byzantine position, certainly before the Western influences on Greek and Russian theology after the Renaissance, was that nothing evil can come from God, not even punishment. The punishment and

torments of hell are only inflicted from ourselves, both in this world and in the next one. Hell and its fire is not different, essentially, from the benevolent energy of God, when experienced by the sinners. The restoration of all, at best an interesting and possible speculation though not a doctrine, is an idea not too far from all this.

Origen, the writer most commonly associated with [apokatastasis panton](#), although not the first one (Clement of Alexandria was the first Christian writer to speak of the fire of Hell as a "wise" fire, the means by which sinners are purified and, ultimately, saved), saw an end to the cycle of successive worlds, predicting if not a final restoration, from which there would be no Fall, at least the possibility of it. Origen's cosmological scheme starts with the creation of the logikoi who, falling away from God undergo an ontological change to psychai (souls), and ends with the return of (all) the souls to God.

In *De Principiis* 1 VI 3 Origen argued that even the logikoi most remote from God can ascend to the human condition and from there to the angelic. He did not explicitly say that everybody will eventually be saved, but it seems he believed so, from statements like "you, reader, must judge whether this portion of the creation [the evil men and angels] shall be utterly and entirely out of harmony even with that final unity and concord, both in the ages that are *seen* and *temporal* and in those that are *not seen* and *eternal*." And further down "every rational nature can, in the process of passing from one order to another, travel through each order to all the rest, and from all to each, while undergoing the various movements of progress or the reverse in accordance with its own actions and endeavors and with the use of its power of free will."

Origen's position follows naturally after two assumptions: that the power of free will remains to the soul after death, and that God has not created an eternal place of damnation. Augustine, on the other hand, believed hell to be eternal and also created specifically for the punishment of the sinful, and influenced, probably unfortunately, the entire Western Christian tradition. Origen saw the entrapment of the logikoi in matter, as well as the flames of hell, both as a punishment and as a means of rehabilitation, so that they can be "encouraged" to return to God. Furthermore, he writes elsewhere (*De Principiis* 2 X 8) that hell is not eternal. "There is resurrection of the dead, and there is punishment, but not everlasting. For when the body is punished the soul is gradually purified, and so restored to its ancient rank. For all wicked men, and for demons, too, punishment has an end, and both wicked men and demons shall be restored to their former rank." The whole system was recapitulated by Origen in the triad becoming, rest, movement. Nevertheless, Origen's system, at least as it was known from the works of his enemies as well as from his admirers, allowed for the return of all the fallen souls to God and their salvation, even the salvation of Satan, although it is not certain that these souls would not turn their attention away from God once more, and their fall would not be repeated again and again.

Gregory of Nyssa in *On the Soul and the Resurrection* 7 and in the *Catechetical Oration* 26 followed Origen in that the fire of hell has a purifying role and is, therefore, not eternal. He goes even further in his argument however, positing that since evil has no real existence, its "relative" existence will be completely annihilated at the end of time. According to how much the souls are attached to the material condition, purification may be instant or long and painful. Gregory compared purification by the fire of hell to the chemical purification of gold by fire, and to a muddy rope that is cleaned when passed through a small hole. Although his images seem dangerously dualist, we should not forget that evil for Gregory has no real existence, and therefore what he presents is no more than the destruction of everything that was not created by God in the first place. In

both writings mentioned above, he stated his belief in the final restoration of all: "When, over long periods of time, evil has been removed and those now lying in sin have been restored to their original state, all creation will join in united thanksgiving, both those whose purification has involved punishment and those who never needed purification at all" (*Catechetical Oratio* 26).

The main role of divine judgement, according to Gregory, is not to punish the sinners. Instead, it "operates by separating good from evil and pulling the soul towards the fellowship of blessedness" (*On the Soul and the Resurrection* 7). More than merely "separating," the purifying fire will melt away evil so that what is left is only good. We have to keep in mind that in several of the writings of Gregory of Nyssa on the Fall and the nature of evil, Satan is not presented as the adversary of God but as the adversary of man. In that sense, the "relative" existence of evil does not diminish God's power or goodness. Evil is directly connected with the pain experienced by sinners after the last judgement, when they are given to torture "until they pay back all that they owe." Then they will "enter into freedom and confidence" and "God will be all in all."

Gregory put forward a view of the universe, where the cosmos was created "so that the wealth of divine good things might not be idle." Our bodies are the receptacles of "good things" and as they are fed thus grow and require even more divine food. Participation in the divine is likened to a growth with no limit, nourished by God's limitless supply of goodness. This is the divine plan, and the attachment to the "material condition" is only a hindrance for this growth. Gregory, moreover, sees the final restoration in a resurrected body, made "from the same elements, but not with its present coarse and heavy texture, but subtler and lighter." This is quite important, because Gregory's metaphors often give the impression, on a first reading, that they hold matter in contempt, sounding almost dualist at times, but his view of evil and matter is decisively different from this. The "material condition" he often mentions is a condition of the soul rather than an inherent property of body matter. Gregory had an interesting view of the "material condition", or the "condition of the flesh", which is not directly associated to the original body of Adam and Eve. After the Fall, he argued, God gave Adam and Eve "garments of skin", that correspond to the fallen body and the bodily passions, but the natural, original condition of the human being is still part of the human nature, which will eventually return to it. This way Gregory maintains the ascetic ideal, but combined with a deep respect for matter itself. The ontological transformation of the body, both before the fall and after the end, are consequences of the movement of the soul away from or towards God. In that, Gregory differs significantly from Origen, whose theory of beginning and eschatology has no place for matter and the body.

Nevertheless, Gregory does not accept the restoration of all and the subsequent forgiveness of all as an inescapable necessity. Nobody will be saved without going through repentance, cleansing and forgiveness, and his view of the apokatastasis is merely the belief that everyone will be able to see truth as it is at the end, and everyone will be given the chance to repent. He never wrote anything to the effect of a blanket forgiveness of everyone, but he seems to believe that since everyone will see and understand the truth and everyone will be given the chance to repent, everyone *will*, most likely, do just that.

Now, we have to realize that although the idea of the restoration of all is a part of the Eastern spiritual tradition (even if as a hypothesis), the Church could never accept it as a doctrine because, if nothing else, its perceived determinism can lead to spiritual apathy. The theory of apokatastasis has unofficially cost Gregory of Nyssa for many centuries recognition as a theologian of the rank of Basil, Gregory of Nazianzos and John Chrysostom, and was one of the reasons Origen

was anathematized. Yet in some ways it can also be found in the theology of Maximos the Confessor, a Father of the Church who has often been considered the measure of orthodoxy in doctrinal matters and the summit of Orthodox theology.

The ideas of Maximos can be connected to the concept of apokatastasis in three different ways. First, he has written some passages that pertain explicitly on the apokatastasis. Second, some issues examined in his writings can be connected with the apokatastasis, and this association has been drawn by certain scholars, but Maximos refuses to discuss them in detail, in the apophatic expression he borrowed from pseudo-Dionysios, "honoring the truth by silence". Third, Maximos' entire theological system of cosmic salvation and his views on what exactly is restored in the kind of apokatastasis recognized by the Church, can give us a good insight to his views on the possibility of a final restoration of all.

Maximos, in *Questiones et Dubia* 19, commenting on the notion of apokatastasis as found in Gregory of Nyssa, writes that the Church knows or recognizes three kinds of restoration: The first meaning applies to the restoration of the individual through virtue; in this case restoration means the return to the primordial condition of man's goodness. The second meaning applies to the restoration of the whole nature of man during the resurrection of bodies: the ontological condition of paradisaic incorruptibility and immortality is restored. The third, and here Maximos refers specifically to Gregory of Nyssa, applies to the restoration of the powers of the soul to the state they were created, before they were altered by sin. This kind of restoration presents an interesting point for us: to what extent did Maximos share Gregory's (and Origen's) view of final restoration of all as an eschatological certainty?

First, Maximos seems to compare the restoration of the soul to the resurrection of the body: that would mean that this kind of restoration applies to all and not only to the ones who have progressed sufficiently in the course of virtue. It is an ontological restoration then, something like a consequence of the resurrection of the body. Second, restoration of the souls seems to suggest the annihilation of evil, because the effects of sin are healed. This will be achieved by the expulsion of evil from the souls in the continuation of the ages. Finally, all restored souls will come to know God and see that he is *anaitios tês hamartias*, not responsible for the existence of sin, which is the same as saying they will know the true nature of good and evil. The "perverted" powers of the soul will then cast off the memories and the effect of evil, and in a way similar to the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, this involves punishment and purification. Maximos leaves the issue there: His restoration account goes as far as to state that every soul will have knowledge of "good things" (*agatha* – probably the energies of God), but not necessarily participation in them. It is for this reason that he is sometimes thought of as not suggesting the inevitability of restoration of all. Apparently, the step after knowledge of the energies of God is left to the free will of God's creatures. Salvation of all is not an ontological necessity, although it seems to be strongly suggested as the rational consequence of the restoration of the powers of the soul. This seems to be corroborated by Maximos' writings on the transformation of man's gnostic will as a result of restoration:

[Transformation of man's gnostic will will happen] because of the general change and renewal which will take place in the future, at the end of the ages, through God our Savior: a universal renewal of the whole human race, natural but by grace.¹

This point deserves a closer examination, and we shall return to it. Modern commentators of Maximos, such as Brian Daley and Polycarp Sherwood, have

located, in addition to the passage where Maximus writes directly on the apokatastasis, three other passages from the *Questiones ad Thalassium*, which most likely imply Maximus' belief in the final restoration and forgiveness of all. Two of those comments refer to the two trees in the Garden of Eden, a theme connected to the apokatastasis since Origen, and the third to the victory of Christ over evil through his crucifixion. In these passages Maximus states that there is a "better and more secret explanation, which is kept in the minds of the mystics, but we, as well, will honor by silence".

Modern commentators see this honorable silence as an implicit support of the idea of apokatastasis, that remained silent mostly for pastoral reasons. Nevertheless, Maximus never gives his clear support to the idea, and with the exception of the writings cited above, he never engages it at length. Sherwood has also noted the absence of any lengthy criticism on it, in contrast to other Origenist ideas which gave Maximus the language and the chance to develop his system. It is true, on the other hand, that there are many passages in Maximus' work that discuss the situation after the Final Judgment and speak of eternal punishment for the ones who "freely used the *logos* of their being contrary to nature".

Modern scholarship has mined the thought of Maximus in pursuit of direct or even implied support of the concept of apokatastasis rather successfully, but has perhaps overlooked one aspect that seems to take us further inside Maximus' understanding of the last things. As we mentioned previously, the third kind of restoration known by the Church, according to Maximus, the one he connected with Gregory of Nyssa, has to do with the restoration of the powers of the soul before the fall, and it is common to all people, just like the resurrection of the body. We also saw that in the passage from *Expositio in Psalm 59*, Maximus names will as at least one of the powers of the soul that will be restored. Does that mean that gnostic will (the deliberative will particular to the fallen nature) will be transformed into natural will? If so, and that seems most likely to be the case, this is the boldest statement in support of the apokatastasis that we can find in the writings of Maximus. How can it be possible not to repent and to beg for the forgiveness of God in the most profound and sincere way, once our will has been restored to the natural will which is subject to God's will? Maximus' explicit account stops at the moment when every human being has knowledge (*epignosis*) of God, even if not everyone could participate in his energies. This condition however, is going to be brought about for everyone, and has little to do with the spiritual struggle towards God. Now, how can we understand the restoration of the natural will in the human being, with everything this entails about the passions and the soul? Is it possible for human, angelic and even demonic souls at the moment of their bodily and psychic restoration to repent, be forgiven and be accepted in the kingdom of God, since they cast off their deliberative, gnostic will, and should be able to see the difference between good and evil, or will the return be restricted to the ones who repented during life on earth? This is the big question. Maximus, however, is talking about a clear knowledge of God, a disembodied, objective knowledge, which is not necessarily accompanied by a "movement of the soul", something that not only cannot be forced, but that requires the restoration of the virtues, probably necessary for salvation.

What are the problems that such an understanding of Maximus' theology would entail? First of all, if the ontological restoration of the body and the soul were to lead to forgiveness so easily, automatically perhaps, there is no point in trying to do good in this or the next life, something pointed out by most Fathers who wrote on the last things. There would be no judgment, just a blanket forgiveness to everyone. Second, if free will, gnostic or natural, is preserved after the Second

judgment, there is a danger of a second fall, in an Origenist fashion, starting a new cycle of events. Maximos, quite emphatically, modified Origenist cosmology, correcting the Origenist triad of *becoming, rest, movement, into becoming, movement, rest*, indicating precisely that the final situation has to be a cosmic balance, a stable conclusion. In *Ambigua* 65 he writes about the *ogdoad*, the eight day or the age to come, which will be the "better and endless day", which comes after "things in motion have come to rest", and he does make the distinction between the fate of the righteous and the fate of the wicked. It is possible then, that the restoration of the natural will is not sufficient to guarantee that there will be no second fall. It is no surprise that the discourse on the apokatastasis is traditionally connected to the original fall in the Garden of Eden, and the Fathers of the Church saw the original sin not as an ontological fall but as an illness that will nevertheless be concluded in a condition better – and therefore more stable – than the beginning.

How can this be compromised with the restoration of all? On the one hand Maximos foresees the restoration of the natural will and speaks of the purifying fire of the Second Coming, something that implies an end to the purification, but on the other hand he emphasizes the final rest. Perhaps the answer can be found in a comment from the *Questiones ad Thalassium* 22, where Maximos draws a distinction between the present age, the "age of the flesh", which is characterized by doing, and the age of the Spirit that will be characterized by undergoing. This suggests that the final rest will not necessarily be a static rest, but that some kind of activity is conceivable. Moreover, it is not specified if the activity of that age is limited to the righteous only, the analogy to the age of doing suggests the opposite. Is it possible then, that with the mysterious phrase "aeikinetos stasis" (ever-moving rest) that appears in his writings, Maximos envisioned a rest similar to the unification of the soul with God as described by Gregory of Nyssa, where the soul moves infinitely towards God without ever being able to reach the end of infinity, but experiencing and participating increasingly in his energies. The "undergoing" of the sinful souls then might be translated into the contrition and repentance they never had in life, which could perhaps even then bring them closer to God, while the righteous advance in their blissful participation of the divine. Something like that would be consistent with the possibility of a final restoration of all and with Maximos' views on the rest. This active rest would have to be understood as an unchangeable condition in spite of the movement or undergoing of the souls, something that would satisfy its position at the end of the Maximian cosmological triad as the conclusion. It would also mean that there won't be an ontological difference between the righteous and the wicked, as there is not one now.

Eschatology is one of the most precarious aspects of theological thought, because it tries to explain things that have not happened yet, and even when they do our language and understanding might be too limited to fathom them. The apophatic "honor by silence" in Maximos' writings, seems more correct than any treatise on the subject. The restoration of all however, a valid possibility according to the Church, although not a doctrine, has a special place in the hopes of saints who pray for the redemption of their enemies, and it expresses our hope for the charity of God. Possibly the honorable silence expresses this hope, which in spite of the danger of determinism, becomes almost a certainty in this light: If even one human being is able to forgive and pray for the salvation of the entire cosmos, wouldn't God's providence find a way to make it happen?

Notes:

[1](#) Maximos the Confessor: *Expositio in Psalm 59*, PG 90, 857 A4-15

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