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## 1 | Problems with perichoresis

However, the idea of perichoresis . . . quickly became a trinitarian rather than a Christological term, and the concept of a perichoresis between the two natures in the incarnate Mediator was never developed.

Donald Macleod

Perichoresis could be regarded as a kind of theological black box. It has been used in the history of theology as a means of filling a conceptual gap in reflection upon the Trinity and the hypostatic union in the Incarnation. This gap has to do with how it is that the two natures of Christ, or the persons of the Trinity, can be said to be united in such an intimate way that, in the case of the Trinity, there are ‘not three gods, but one god’, and, in the case of the hypostatic union, that there are not two entities in one body, but two natures held together in perfect union in one person. Perichoresis fills this gap with the notion that the two natures of Christ and the persons of the Trinity somehow interpenetrate one another, yet without confusion of substance or commingling of natures. But what does it mean to say that the persons of the Trinity exist in perichoretic unity, mutually interpenetrating one another, or that the two natures of Christ subsist perichoretically, in a hypostatic union?

This chapter is an attempt to make some sense of these two applications of the doctrine of perichoresis to the Incarnation and Trinity. Although a complete analysis of the doctrine is not possible, I think enough can be said by way of explanation to make this doctrine clear enough for the theological purposes it serves. I say that a complete

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analysis of perichoresis with respect to the hypostatic union, or the ontology of the Trinity, is not possible because the Trinity and Incarnation are divine mysteries. Since perichoresis is a theological concept that bears upon these two mysteries, by trying to make clear something of the ontology of the hypostatic union and the Trinity, it too touches upon things mysterious. By the term ‘mystery’ I mean some doctrine or notion that is beyond the ken of human beings, or beyond the limits of human reason, not a doctrine or notion that is somehow confused or contradictory. Peter van Inwagen seems to me to be correct in this regard, when, in speaking of the mysterious nature of the Trinity, he says:

It may be that it is important for us to know that God is (somehow) three Persons in one Being and not at all important for us to have any inkling of how this could be – or even to be able to answer alleged demonstrations that it is self-contradictory. It may be that we cannot understand how God can be three Persons in one Being. It may be that an intellectual grasp of the Trinity is forever beyond us. And why not, really? It is not terribly daring to suppose that reality may contain things whose natures we cannot understand.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, trying to understand something of what perichoresis means with application to the Incarnation and Trinity is a worthwhile enterprise, even if it is not possible to fully explain or comprehend it. If we try to pursue our reflections upon matters theological in the tradition of faith seeking understanding, then there is a right place for ‘thinking God’s thoughts after him’, and reasoned reflection about theistic metaphysics. Part of that tradition, at least as I understand it, is that we pursue our thinking in the knowledge that we can know the mysteries of God only in faltering and partial ways. Thus theologizing and philosophizing about these matters must be

<sup>1</sup> See ‘And yet there are not three Gods but one God’, in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Philosophy and The Christian Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 243.

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tempered with humility in the face of the incomprehensibility of divine mystery.<sup>2</sup>

### Two applications of perichoresis

In what follows we shall distinguish between two doctrines of perichoresis via the following designations: *nature-perichoresis*, denoting the perichoretic relation that exists in the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures in Incarnation, and *person-perichoresis*, denoting the perichoretic relations that exist between the persons of the Trinity.<sup>3</sup> These two versions of perichoresis are two generic forms of the doctrine. This is because the designation of a doctrine of perichoresis as 'nature'-perichoresis, or 'person'-perichoresis serves only to distinguish these two applications of perichoresis in theology, not to circumscribe, or express, what constitutes the substance of the doctrine in each of these two cases. There are, in fact, a number of different versions of each of nature- and person-perichoresis, as we shall see. The task of this chapter is to attempt to analyse perichoresis in order to show which versions of this doctrine are coherent and

<sup>2</sup> I should point out that what follows will not offer an *explanation* of what it means to say that the persons of the Trinity exist in perichoretic unity, mutually interpenetrating each other. While I will have something to say by way of distinguishing between perichoresis in the Trinity and in the Incarnation, the focus here is principally on the application of perichoresis to the Incarnation, not to the Trinity. My point here about the mysterious nature of perichoresis goes for its application to both the Trinity and the Incarnation.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Swinburne points out the Greek terms for these two doctrines in *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 209, n. 20. They are *perichoresis physeon* and *perichoresis hypostaton* respectively. I have not followed Swinburne in this designation, though it has the *imprimatur* of patristic theology, because it seems to be rather confusing to talk about the hypostatic union of Christ and *physic perichoresis* on the one hand, and the perichoretic relations in the Trinity as *hypostatic* on the other. Besides, as Professor Alan Torrance reminded me, there are a host of theological controversies surrounding the concept of *hypostasis* and its cognates, which I am keen to avoid here.

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which are not. We shall examine both of these versions of perichoresis, beginning with nature-perichoresis and the person of Christ.

**The *communicatio idiomatum* and nature-perichoresis**

The history of the concept of perichoresis has to do as much with misunderstandings between some of the Church Fathers about what the concept means as it has to do with reflection upon the hypostatic union and persons of the Trinity. For this reason, the historical development of the doctrine is important for understanding the conceptual development that it involved.<sup>4</sup> Put in barest outline, perichoresis was first used by some of the Fathers to make sense of the hypostatic union, and only later taken up as a means of explicating the ontology of the Trinity. The patristic scholar Leonard Prestige says that perichoresis was first used by Gregory Nazianzen in the fourth century AD, in his *Epistle 101* and elsewhere, and was subsequently deployed in the work of Maximus the Confessor. Both of these early Christian theologians used the concept to refer to the hypostatic union only. Thus Gregory in *Epistle 101* says, ‘Just as the natures are mixed, so also the names pass reciprocally into each other by the principle of this coalescence.’<sup>5</sup> Randall Otto comments on this passage: ‘Perichoresis thus signifies the attribution of one nature’s prerogatives to the other, subsequently termed *communicatio idiomatum* [communication of attributes], by virtue of the interpenetration, but not commingling, of these [two] natures.’<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Randall Otto, ‘The use and abuse of Perichoresis in recent theology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001), pp. 366–384; G. L. Prestige, ‘ΠΕΡΙΧΟΡΕΩ and ΠΕΡΙΧΟΡΕΣΙΣ in the Fathers’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 29 (1928), pp. 242–252; Richard Cross, ‘Christological predication in John of Damascus’, *Mediaeval Studies* 62 (2000), pp. 69–124; and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, 2nd edn, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977). My rendition of the historical material owes much to these sources.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory, *Epistle 101*, in *Patrologia Graeca* 37.181C, cited in Otto, ‘The use and abuse of perichoresis’, p. 368.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

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In a similar fashion, according to Prestige, Maximus maintained that the human nature of Christ reciprocates with the divine nature of Christ: ‘The metaphor is still that employed by Gregory: the two opposites are revealed as complementary sides of a single concrete object by the rotation of that object: the two natures reciprocate not merely in name, as with Gregory, but in practical effect and operation.’<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that, in this early version of nature-perichoresis, there is no clear notion of interpenetration.<sup>8</sup> It was John of Damascus in the mid-seventh century AD who took perichoresis and applied it to the doctrine of the Trinity in his treatise *De fide orthodoxa* (‘On the orthodox faith’). In the process he introduced the notion of interpenetration into the discussion of the doctrine in a technical fashion, rather than, as with Gregory of Nazianzus, in passing. However, this introduction of the term ‘interpenetration’ came about, according to Prestige, via a misunderstanding of Maximus’ work. The doctrine of perichoresis prior to John Damascene seems to be closer to, although perhaps not the same as, a doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* or communication of attributes. Thus, it appears, there was an important conceptual change in the way perichoresis was understood as the doctrine was developed.<sup>9</sup>

However, it is important not to confuse the communication of attributes with nature-perichoresis. The doctrine of the communication of attributes has to do with how apparently contradictory properties can be predicated of the one person of Christ, while holding the two natures together in the hypostatic union without confusing or conflating them. (For instance, the apparently contradictory

<sup>7</sup> Prestige, ‘ΠΕΡΙΧΟΡΕΩ and ΠΕΡΙΧΟΡΕΣΙΣ in the Fathers’, p. 243. Compare Otto, who cites Maximus as follows: ‘The human nature interpenetrates the divine nature, to which it is united without any confusion.’ From *Ambiguum Liber* 112b, *Patrologia Graeca* 91.1053, in Otto, ‘The use and abuse of Perichoresis’, p. 369.

<sup>8</sup> A point noted by Pannenberg. He comments, ‘The Cappadocians in the fourth century still conceive this unity rather carelessly as a mixture.’ *Jesus – God and Man*, p. 297.

<sup>9</sup> See Cross’s article ‘Christological predication in John of Damascus’ for a more nuanced account of this.

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properties of ‘being created at a particular time’ and ‘being eternal’, which seem to be in the background of Christ’s declaration, in John 8.58: ‘Before Abraham was born, I am.’) The doctrine of nature-perichoresis has to do with how the two natures are united in the hypostatic union. It does not give a complete explanation of how the two natures are united, but it goes some way to showing how they might be united together. In particular, in those versions of nature-perichoresis after John of Damascus, it has to do with how the two natures of Christ can be said to interpenetrate one another without confusing or commingling of the natures, and without generating a *tertium quid* (that is, a third sort of thing made up of the fusion of the two natures, or parts of the two natures thereof). To make clear just how it is that the communication of attributes is not the same as nature-perichoresis (Gregory and Maximus notwithstanding), we shall consider each of these two doctrines in turn.<sup>10</sup>

*The communicatio idiomatum*

There are several ways in which the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* could be construed. The weakest form of the communication of attributes involves no transference of properties from one of the natures of Christ to the other. Instead, the properties of the divine nature and the properties of the human nature are both predicated of the person of Christ. In this way the integrity of both natures is preserved, without the confusion or commingling of either. It is also the case, according to this version of the doctrine, that things belonging to one nature alone cannot be predicated of the other nature in

<sup>10</sup> Donald Macleod says that nature-perichoresis was never taken up by the Church (see the superscription at the beginning of this chapter). Instead, the communication of attributes was thought sufficient to the purpose of making sense of the hypostatic union. On the view I shall develop, one could hold both doctrines according to an orthodox (that is, biblical and Chalcedonian) Christology. See Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), p. 194.

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the communication of attributes. This means that it is true to say that Christ is both omnipotent and yet unable to perform miracles at Nazareth because of the lack of faith among the villagers, and that he is all-knowing and yet ignorant of the time of his second coming, and so forth. But it would be false, on this understanding of the communication of attributes, to say things like ‘Christ is ignorant in his divinity’, or ‘Christ is omnipotent in his humanity.’<sup>11</sup> This notion can be found in Pope Leo’s *Tome*:

Since then the properties of both natures and substances were preserved and co-existed in One Person, humility was embraced by majesty, weakness by strength, mortality by eternity; and to pay the debt of our condition the inviolable nature was united to a passible nature; so that, as was necessary for our healing, there was one and the same ‘Mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ,’ who was capable of death in one nature and incapable of it in the other. In the complete and perfect nature, therefore, of every man, very God was born – complete in what belonged to Him, complete in what belonged to us.<sup>12</sup>

We could express this weak version of the communication of attributes in the following way:

Weak *communicatio idiomatum*: The attribution of the properties of each of the natures of Christ to the person of Christ, such that the theanthropic *person* of Christ is treated as having divine and human attributes at one and the same time, yet without predicating attributes of one nature that properly belong to the other nature in the hypostatic union, without transference of properties between the

<sup>11</sup> See Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1960), bk III, pt 1, § 1, ch. 5, § 21, p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> T. H. Bindley, *The Ecumenical Documents of the Faith*, 4th edn (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1950), p. 226.

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natures and without confusing or commingling the two natures of Christ or the generation of a *tertium quid*.<sup>13</sup>

However, it seems paradoxical to suggest that both divine and human properties can be predicated of the person of Christ. If we were to say merely that Christ is omnipotent and limited in power without qualification, this would, indeed, appear paradoxical, if not contradictory. However, we could say that the person of Christ is said to be omnipotent and limited in power with the qualifications ‘according to his divine nature’ and ‘according to his human nature’ respectively. In this case the person of Christ may be said to be both omnipotent and physically limited in power, provided it is borne in mind that each of these statements refers, strictly speaking, to the particular nature that each property belongs to (omnipotence to the divine nature; physical limitation to the human nature), held in the hypostatic union of the person of Christ.<sup>14</sup> In this way, some sense can be made of reference to the person of Christ in terms of properties that belong to both his human and his divine nature.

But there is a stronger way in which the communication of attributes could be understood. This stronger sense incorporates the central insight of the weaker view, which is that the properties of both natures can be attributed to the person of Christ. But, in addition to

<sup>13</sup> The use of the phrase ‘theanthropic person of Christ’ (that is, the God-Mannish person of Christ) guards against claiming that Christ is a human person, which seems rather odd at first glance. But I take it that a constituent of Chalcedonian Christology is that Christ is a divine person possessing a human nature, not both a divine and a human person, or merely a human person, both of which would be theologically unorthodox. In what follows, where Christ is spoken of as a person, the reader should understand this to mean ‘theanthropic person of Christ’.

<sup>14</sup> From this it follows that if Jesus is ignorant *qua* human, then the inference from ‘*x* is *F* according to *x*’s *K* nature’ to ‘*x* is *F*’ is invalid. But then, it is not the person of Christ who is ignorant, but his divine nature. This raises the following question: What work is the reduplication doing when applied to the person of Christ (i.e. Christ is ignorant *qua* human, not *qua* divine)? All it does is make clear that in predicating certain things of Christ, we must be aware that there is a certain group of attributes which pertain to one nature alone, not to the whole person of Christ.

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this, it also maintains that there is a real transference of properties between the two natures of Christ. This view is traditionally associated with Lutheran theology.<sup>15</sup> So, for example, in his developed views on the matter Luther says: ‘The two natures dwell in the Lord Christ, and yet He is but one person. These two natures retain their properties, and each also communicates its properties to the other.’<sup>16</sup> One way of construing this is to say that there is a real transfer of (some) properties from the divine to the human nature, and vice versa. This seems to be the view of Luther in some of his later works.<sup>17</sup> Then, the divine nature would possess properties of the human nature, and the human nature would possess properties of the divine nature, because each nature shares its properties in common in the hypostatic union, yet without confusion of the two natures.<sup>18</sup> But, without important qualifications, this appears to be false. For I take it that no two natures can share all and only the same properties as each other, and remain distinct entities. That is, if two things share all the same properties and only the same properties, having no properties that they do not hold in common, then they are the same thing.

<sup>15</sup> Although the issues discussed in the Reformation debate about the communication of attributes were part of a much older controversy, between the rival schools of Christology in the patristic period. Pannenberg makes this clear in *Jesus – God and Man*, p. 298.

<sup>16</sup> Luther’s *Works*, xxii, pp. 491–492, cited in Dennis Ngien, ‘Chalcedonian Christology and beyond: Luther’s understanding of the communicatio idiomatum’, *Heythrop Journal* 45 (2004), p. 59. Ngien prefaces this citation with the following: ‘Did Luther go beyond the traditional view, conceiving in the person of Christ the idea of a real communication of attributes between the two natures themselves? The answer is yes.’

<sup>17</sup> See Ngien, ‘Chalcedonian Christology and beyond’. See also Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988 [1939]), pp. 325–326. For a standard (conservative) Lutheran account of the communication of attributes, see Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), pp. 129ff.

<sup>18</sup> This sort of view makes more sense if the natures of Christ are understood to be sets of properties, rather than, as I shall be using the term, concrete particulars. I shall explain this distinction in chapter two.

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To make this clear, consider the following. Let an individual essence denote a set of properties, which, held by a particular property-bearer – a substance – individuates that particular thing.<sup>19</sup> Now, if the two natures of Christ share all and only the same properties as each other, then they have the same essence. This is the case where a version of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles applies. If a particular nature, *a*, has a certain set of properties *F*, and another nature, *b*, has a certain set of properties *G*, and all the properties *F* of *a* are the same as all the properties *G* of *b*, and neither nature has properties that are not shared between the sets of properties *F* and *G*, then it would seem that there is nothing to distinguish *a* from *b*: they are identical.<sup>20</sup> But this cannot be the case with regard to the hypostatic union, precisely because it is a union between two distinct natures in one person, not merely a single nature, nor one nature under two different names, nor the fusion of two natures together

<sup>19</sup> An individual essence is to be distinguished from a kind essence. A kind essence comprises all those properties essential to a particular thing belonging to a particular kind, such as the kind 'horse' to which the thing called 'Champion the Wonder Horse' belongs. Christ has an individual essence, but this could comprise two kind essences, one human and one divine, if, and only if, all substances have *at most* one individual essence and all substances have *at least* one kind essence. In which case, Christ has his human essence contingently, but his divine essence essentially. I should point out that kind and individual essences should not be confused with natures, although in the current literature they are often used as synonyms. A nature might be a concrete particular – a substance of some sort. This is how I understand the term 'human nature'. An essence is not a substance, it is just a set of properties. Thomas Morris has defended a view similar to this in the recent literature. See *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), chs. 2–3.

<sup>20</sup> There are well-known problems with some versions of the identity of indiscernibles, for instance, the idea that there could be a possible world containing only two qualitatively identical brass spheres placed at a certain distance from each other. In such a world it looks as if both objects have all the same properties including the same relational properties, but are distinct objects. But it would be very odd to think that this sort of counter-example applies to the two natures of Christ. Credally orthodox theology seems to require more than the fact that each of Christ's two natures is self-identical to distinguish between them! For one thing, the divine nature of Christ has certain properties essentially that the human nature does not, such as 'necessarily being a member of the divine Trinity'.