

# CAPPADOCIAN LEGACY

## *A Critical Appraisal*

Edited by

Doru Costache and Philip Kariatlis

St Andrew's Orthodox Press  
Sydney, 2013

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Title: Cappadocian legacy / Doru Costache and Philip Kariatlis (eds).

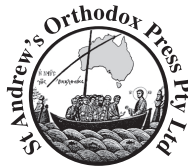
ISBN: 978-0-9775974-9-9 (paperback)

Notes: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Subjects: Gregory, of Nazianzus, Saint.  
Basil, Saint, Bishop of Caesarea,  
approximately 329-379.  
Gregory, of Nyssa, Saint,  
approximately 335-approximately 394  
Theology--Early works to 1800  
Christian saints--Biography--Early works to 1800.

Other Authors/Contributors:  
Costache, Doru, editor.  
Kariatlis, Philip, editor.

Dewey Number: 230



St Andrew's Orthodox Press  
242 Cleveland Street, Redfern, NSW, 2016  
[www.standrewsorthodoxpress.com.au](http://www.standrewsorthodoxpress.com.au)

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# Seeking Out the Antecedents of the Maximian Theory of Everything: St Gregory the Theologian's *Oration* 38

*Doru Costache*

**Abstract:** The paper begins by briefly describing the famous 'theory of everything' expounded by St Maximus the Confessor in *Difficulty* 41. This fascinating Maximian narrative endeavours to give an account of the whole of reality, in its complex multi-level structure. Although St Maximus maintains, by way of introduction, that this teaching draws on the tradition of the saints, nothing similar can be found in the writings of previous Church fathers. Contemporary scholars have at times attempted to search for the roots of this tradition, without much success. Not claiming to be exhaustive, this paper explores a possible trajectory, ignored by scholarship, within two passages (11 and 17) in St Gregory the Theologian's *Oration* 38, considered in the context of his celebrated Theophany sermons.

The prologue of *Difficulty* 41<sup>1</sup> claims that St Maximus' 'theory of everything',<sup>2</sup> presented within a soteriological framework<sup>3</sup> and dealing with five divisions and syntheses of reality, draws on the mystical tradition of the saints. The subsequent depiction has, however, no equivalent in the recorded patristic tradition. This is quite an intriguing aspect. Looking for

*This is a reworked and expanded version of the article with the same title, published in Phronema 26:2 (2011): 27-45. I am grateful to Fr Bogdan Bucur, Adam Cooper, Philip Kariatlis, Mario Baghos and the Phronema reviewers, for their patient rectification of my stylistic shortcomings and their constructive suggestions.*

<sup>1</sup> PG 91, 1304D. For an English version, see Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 156.

<sup>2</sup> The designation of St Maximus' vision of reality in *Difficulty* 41 and parallels, like *To Thalassius*, 48 (PG 90, 436AB) as a theory of everything belongs to me. I consistently used this label throughout my unpublished doctoral thesis, 'Logos and Creation: From the Anthropocentric Cosmological Principle to the Theanthropocosmic Perspective' (University of Bucharest, 2000; in Romanian), and in the article 'Going Upwards with Everything You Are: The Unifying Ladder of St Maximus the Confessor,' in Basarab Nicolescu and Magda Stavinschi (eds.), *Science and Orthodoxy: A Necessary Dialogue* (București: Curtea Veche, 2006): 135-144.

<sup>3</sup> PG 91, 1304D-1313B. Cf. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 156-62.

the sources of the theory, one's first reaction would then be to ascribe it to the unwritten lore, which incidentally might be correct. I cannot treat this aspect here. Nevertheless, in recent times there have been attempts to trace the literary antecedents of this worldview; below, I shall address a number of such endeavours.

My purpose in the following is to expound on the sources of the theory, focusing on the input of St Gregory the Theologian. In so doing, I challenge the surprising lack of interest manifested by contemporary scholarship in St Gregory when seeking out the antecedents of the Confessor's elaborations. By shedding new light on the Theologian's *Oration* 38.11 and 38.17 (considered in the context of the Theophany sermons, 38-40) and its contribution to the process that led to the Maximian construct, this paper intends to offer a modest tribute to St Gregory and his legacy.

### St Maximus' Theory of Everything

The opening section of *Difficulty* 41 constitutes a significant contribution to the Christian worldview, which should be considered – albeit in a broad sense – as cognate with the current quest for a theory of everything.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, St Maximus attempted to map the ultimate elements of reality, as known to Byzantine cosmography, and to gather them into a comprehensive synthesis. This effort emerges for instance in his strenuous contemplation of the divine thoughts, or λόγοι,<sup>5</sup> which both traverse and bridge all realms: the uncreated, the angelic noosphere – to paraphrase Teilhard de Chardin's coinage –, the cosmos, the biosphere and humankind. Without being artic-

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps exotic to some readers, the notion of a theory of everything is common in contemporary cosmology. It refers to the current efforts of reaching an algorithmic formula able to account for all of reality. For Paul Davies, it is the quest for "a complete description of the world" which stems from "the idea that all physical laws could be unified into a single mathematical scheme." Cf. Paul Davies, *The Mind of God: Science and the Search for Ultimate Meaning* (Penguin Books, 1992), 21, 33, 136. See also John D. Barrow, *The Constants of Nature: From Alpha to Omega – the Numbers That Encode the Deepest Secrets of the Universe* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 53-76. Based on the conviction that the universe is "a manifestation of rational order" (Davies, *The Mind of God*, 22, 165), the concept represents a scientific alternative to what the humanities describe as a meta-narrative, or the underlying reason for some particular developments and events. Davies argues convincingly that although in itself a provoking thought a single, both consistent and complete theory of everything is impossible (cf. Davies, *The Mind of God*, 167-68; see also Barrow, *The Constants of Nature*, 285, 291). In the following, I shall utilise the concept with this relative connotation, as a depiction of reality that does not claim to encompass all of its strands.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. *Difficulty* 7 (PG 91, 1077C-1080B, 1081AB).

ulated in the complex language of contemporary mathematics, this concept is no less a ‘theory of everything.’ In fact, and keeping the proportions, the Confessor’s numerological digressions<sup>6</sup> might suggest an intention to give the Christian worldview an alternate mathematical shape, perhaps evocative of the Pythagorean system. This aspect brings the Maximian construct even closer to the current notion of a theory of everything.

That said, we move to the analysis of this enticing expression of St Maximus’ worldview. As presented in *Difficulty* 41,<sup>7</sup> the whole of reality encompasses five irreducible divisions or polarities. In my translation, the text reads as follows.

The first [polarity] [...] separates the entire created nature (τὴν κτιστὴν καθόλου φύσιν) [...] from the uncreated nature (τῆς ἀκτίηστου φύσεως). [...] The second is that according to which the entire being that has received existence from God by creation is differentiated into the intelligible and the sensible (νοητὰ καὶ αἰσθητὰ). The third is that by which the sensible being is divided into sky and earth (οὐρανὸν καὶ γῆν). The fourth is that by which the earth is divided into paradise and the inhabited world (παράδεισον καὶ οἰκουμένην). And the fifth is that by which the human being, like a comprehensive workshop of everything and which mediates physically between the edges of all polarities, [...] is divided into male and female (ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ).

The five polarities constitute an encompassing description of reality, which evokes both cultural and scriptural features, and which presents these elements in the form of a structured hierarchy – the Porphyrian tree, according to Torstein Theodor Tollefsen.<sup>8</sup> In its sequence of layers, this hierarchy begins with the most general aspect to end with the most particular one, as depicted by the Christian worldview. Thus, the first polarity, corresponding to the fundamental Christian division of being as seen by St Athanasius and the Cappadocians, considers the ultimate ontological rift at the heart of reality, which divides the uncreated and created realms; the second, evoking the great Platonic division, addresses the diversity pertaining to the whole of creation, consisting of the intelligible and the sensible; the third, the Aristotelian division, refers to the sensible domain, subdivided into sky and

<sup>6</sup> See Despina D. Prassas, ‘Introduction’ to *St Maximus the Confessor’s Questions and Doubts* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> PG 91, 1304D-1305B.

<sup>8</sup> Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, ‘The Ethical Consequences of the Christian Conception of Nature as Created by God,’ *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 45:4 (2001): 395-408, at 398.

earth; the fourth, reiterating Genesis 2-3, identifies on earth the inhabited zone (or the world of civilisation) and the paradise; and the fifth, evoking Genesis 1, highlights the gender division as the basic polarity of humankind.

St Maximus presents the five divisions as existential challenges. The human being appears to be appointed by the creator Logos with the task of overcoming these challenges by tapping into the divine rationality that permeates creation. The accomplishment of this task is possible only for those that live virtuously,<sup>9</sup> since virtue corresponds to the ubiquitous ground of divine rationality. The unifying process advances in the reverse order of the five divisions, as follows:<sup>10</sup> first, the human synthesis, by way of overcoming the gender division; second, the union between the inhabited world and paradise; third, the union of earth and sky, as the two main zones of the visible realm; fourth, the synthesis of the visible and invisible domains; and fifth, the communion of the created and the uncreated. Textually, and again in my translation, St Maximus stated as follows.

...the human being was introduced among [the other] beings as a final grace and a natural link of sorts (σύνδεσμός τις φυσικός) that in general mediates by its own parts between extremities, bringing to unity (εἰς ἓν) in itself the many [things] that are physically separated [...]. By the union that brings together all things to God, their cause, beginning with its own division [i.e. the fifth] and advancing – sequentially and orderly – through the intermediate [polarities], [the human being] reaches the end of the ascension accomplished through all the realms by union with God, in whom there is no division.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, humanity relinquished its task and by abandoning the virtuous lifestyle became the origin of what can be depicted as negative waves.<sup>12</sup> These catastrophic aftershocks caused the polarities to sharpen, threatening to disrupt the fabric of the universe – a phenomenon repressed by the providential intervention of God. The process of gradual unification was boosted anew by the incarnation and salvific economy of the Logos, our Lord Christ, through which all five syntheses were accomplished.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, in *To Thalassius*, 48, St Maximus pondered Christ's mediating action

<sup>9</sup> PG 91, 1305C. Cf. Tollefsen, 'The Ethical Consequences,' 399; at 403, Tollefsen rehearses the same idea yet seemingly not allowing for the virtue to be interpreted as an ecosystemic factor.

<sup>10</sup> PG 91, 1305B-1308C.

<sup>11</sup> *Difficulty* 41 (PG 91, 1305BC).

<sup>12</sup> See for instance *To Thalassius*, 64 (PG 90, 696C).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Difficulty* 41 (PG 91, 1308CD).



between the five divisions as an outcome of the hypostatic union, by repeatedly using the verb ἥνωσεν (“he united”).<sup>14</sup>

Although worthwhile for the Christian worldview in general, here is neither the place for a detailed analysis of this magnificent construct (with its theocentric anthropology evaluated cosmologically) nor an investigation of its cultural and theological ramifications. I must turn now to the various opinions on the sources of St Maximus’ theory.

### Seeking Out the Antecedents of the Maximian Theory

Looking for the sources of the theory, many scholars assumed that there must have been a development of the idea from simpler forms to the mature elaboration by the Confessor. In spite of the fact that, already in 1941, Hans Urs von Balthasar highlighted the originality of the Maximian synthesis and warned against reducing it to the numerous sources it reworked,<sup>15</sup> later scholars exhibited a persistent interest in identifying the origin of the Confessor’s theory. Thus, only a few years after the first edition of the *Cosmic Liturgy*, in 1944 Vladimir Lossky implied that the theory stems from the patristic consensus regarding the diversity of creation brought to unity into the human being.<sup>16</sup> However, his allusions to St Basil the Great, St Gregory of Nyssa and St Isaac the Syrian, failed to demonstrate a direct connection. The same goes for Georges Florovsky’s loose references to Philo, St Gregory of Nyssa and Nemesis of Emessa.<sup>17</sup>

Forty years after the first edition of Lossky’s work, Lars Thunberg discussed more thoroughly the sources of St Maximus’ construct. He surveyed a series of classical and Christian thinkers, focusing on their contributions to the concept of the microcosm, as an important stage in the reflective process that led to the Maximian theory.<sup>18</sup> The inclusion in this survey of St Gregory the Theologian’s use of “micros cosmos” in *Oration 28.22* is note-

<sup>14</sup> Cf. PG 90, 436AB. I am grateful to Adam Cooper for pointing out to me the connection between the five syntheses and the hypostatic union, in relation to this Maximian text.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. by Brian E. Daley, SJ (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 56-63.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 106-108.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *The Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eighth Century*, trans. R. Miller and A. M. Dollinger-Labriolle (Vaduz: BUCHER-Vertriebsanstalt, 1987), 225-26.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, second edition (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1995), 132-35.

worthy<sup>19</sup> yet Thunberg manifested no interest in *Oration* 38.11, where the same concept is used under a different guise – “as a kind of second world, great within the small one” – as we shall see below. The Swedish scholar concentrated much of his attention however on St Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Making of Man*, 16 and *The Great Catechetical Oration*, 6,<sup>20</sup> together with Nemesius of Emesa’s *On the Nature of Man*, 1.<sup>21</sup> He considered these passages to have had a crucial impact upon St Maximus’ thought, and provided brief descriptions of the respective contexts. Thus, the texts in the Nyssen exalt human dignity, which consists in the fact of being in God’s image, within an attempt to give a Christian spin to the philosophical concept of the microcosm. In turn, Thunberg believed that the chapter from Nemesius went beyond the Nyssen’s musings by reflecting philosophically upon the unifying task ascribed to humankind by God. However, this last aspect is not supported by the text, which consists in a good summary of the overall Cappadocian teaching whilst being deprived of originality and philosophical virtues.<sup>22</sup> In turn, drawing on Thunberg’s work, which he cited, John Meyendorff introduced his very succinct description of the Maximian theory by emphasising that the Cappadocians already addressed the topic of humankind’s task with their copious use of the concept of the microcosm.<sup>23</sup>

More recently, the quest for antecedents continued with Andrew Louth, who prefaced his translation of *Difficulty* 41 by pointing to St Gregory of Nyssa as its primary source.<sup>24</sup> He referred to two passages in the Nyssen’s *Against Eunomius* (I.270-72 and III.6.62-67), adding their supposed correspondents in the critical edition of Jaeger<sup>25</sup> yet without providing de-

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 135-36.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 136-37. See also *idem*, *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 80. For some reason, in his presentation of Thunberg’s analysis of the antecedents, Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Byzantine Gospel: Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 165, chose to refer only to Nemesius as a source of the Maximian theory. This reduction does an injustice to Thunberg.

<sup>22</sup> See Nemesius’ *A Treatise on the Nature of Man* I.1-10, in *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, edited by William Telfer, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 224-56.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, revised second edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 142.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Maximus the Confessor*, 155, and 212, n.3. Louth voiced the same conviction earlier, at 72, however providing no direct reference to St Gregory of Nyssa.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted as 1.105-106 and 2.66-67. Whereas the first reference to Jaeger’s edition is accurate, the second is inexact; indeed, the text can be found at page 245, and not at 66-67.

tails. Reading the two passages in the critical edition,<sup>26</sup> one discovers that the first treats the Platonic division of being, which refers to the domains of the intelligible (τὸ νοητόν) and the sensible (τὸ αἰσθητόν). The text associates the two classical terms and their presumed scriptural equivalents, the sensible being identified with the visible (ἡ μὲν αἰσθητὴ φύσις ... ὁρατὴ) and the intelligible with the invisible (τὸ ἀόρατον). The passage further addresses the complexity of the intelligible, ascribing to the Platonic concept a Christian meaning by highlighting a more profound duality ingrained within it, i.e. the ontological rift between the uncreated (ἄκτιστος) realm and that of created (κτιστή) nature. The second passage points out the ignorance, or lack of insight (κατανόησιν), of creation regarding God's essence. The topics discussed by St Gregory in the two passages are undeniably rehearsed by the Maximian theory of everything.

When proposing the paragraphs from the Nyssen as exclusive sources of the Maximian theory, Louth seems to have been unaware of a conundrum emerging from his own assertions. Thus, when introducing his translation of *Difficulty* 41, he casually noted that the chapter is “inspired by a famous and influential passage” in St Gregory the Theologian’s *Oration* 39.13. In his translation, the text reads as follows: “and natures are instituted afresh, and God becomes man.”<sup>27</sup> One would have expected a development of this statement yet Louth chose to address the reception of the phrase in the Byzantine tradition and its Western parallels. Only a few lines below the remark concerning the inspiration of St Maximus’ chapter in the Theologian’s thought, he went on to point to the two passages in St Gregory of Nyssa, which I summarised above, as the source of the theory. Given this sudden shift, one might wonder about the significance of the Theologian’s phrase within *Difficulty* 41, a chapter supposedly drawing on the Nyssen. Louth noted that the phrase reappears only at the end of the chapter,<sup>28</sup> by which he implied, I presume, that the Theologian’s thought was not at its centre. Louth’s information, however, is erroneous. St Maximus already returned to the Gregorian text long before the end of the chapter.<sup>29</sup> Even in the event of this remark being sound, which is not the case, this by no means would solve the conundrum.

<sup>26</sup> *Contra Eunomium Libri*, iteratis curis edidit Wernerus Jaeger, Pars Prior, Liber I et II (vulgo I et XIIB) (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), 105-106, 245.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 155, and 212, n. 2. In the original Greek (PG 36, 348D) the text reads: καινοτομοῦνται φύσεις, καὶ Θεὸς ἄνθρωπος γίνεται, which in English would translate as: “the natures renew, and God becomes man.”

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, 156.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. PG 91, 1308CD.

More recently, and again attempting to trace the antecedents of the Maximian theory, Adam Cooper mentioned once more Nemesisius of Emesa's *On the Human Nature*, 1, whilst referring to another work by St Gregory of Nyssa, the *Dialogue on Soul and Resurrection* (PG 46, 28B).<sup>30</sup> Within the same context and to his credit, he discussed St Gregory the Theologian's *Oration* 38.11, yet only in regards to *Difficulty* 7 where the relevant passage is quoted verbatim. Despite this restriction, of all the scholars reviewed above Cooper stands apart in his intuition of *Oration* 38 as a source for the Confessor's worldview.

In the following I shall address the current claims regarding the antecedents of the Maximian theory in St Gregory of Nyssa and Nemesisius, whilst pointing to *Oration* 38 as a forgotten written source for *Difficulty* 41. This does by no means imply that I intend to reduce the Confessor's contribution to another and supposedly more plausible source; I just wish to highlight a few reasons why the Theologian's legacy should not be overlooked. After all, to use Thunberg's words, St Maximus was "a deep admirer of Gregory of Nazianzus, the great *Rhetor* among the Fathers."<sup>31</sup>

I will begin by considering the repeated affirmations referring to Nemesisius' *Treatise on the Nature of Man* as a main source of the Maximian construct. One does not need an exhaustive analysis to realise how, in their enthusiasm for Nemesisius, the above scholars failed to notice the striking similarities between the often-evoked chapter 1 of his treatise and passages from St Gregory of Nyssa. For instance, Nemesisius<sup>32</sup> rendered almost verbatim the evolutionary depiction of life in the Nyssen's *On the Making of Man*, 8.3-7.<sup>33</sup> But his interest in the Cappadocians did not stop there. Nemesisius seems to have also borrowed from St Basil the Great the vision of creation's usefulness for humankind,<sup>34</sup> as discussed in *Homilies on the Hexaemeron*, 5.4 and 5.9.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, and very relevant to our topic, he paraphrased<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 103-104.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Man and the Cosmos*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Treatise on the Nature of Man*, 1.3 (Telfer, 232-34).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, vol. 5, 52-53.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Nemesisius, *Treatise on the Nature of Man*, 1.8-9 (Telfer, 248-50, 251-54).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Basil the Great: Letters and Select Works*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, vol. 8, 77-78, 81.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *Treatise on the Nature of Man*, 1.2 (Telfer, 228-30) and 1.4 (Telfer, 235-37).

St Gregory the Theologian's *Oration* 38.10-11,<sup>37</sup> which depicts creation as brought to unity within the human microcosm. These similarities lead to only one conclusion; that, by all accounts surviving the Cappadocians<sup>38</sup> and being their first reviewer, Nemesisius offered a very skilful summary of their contributions without adding much to their legacy. Therefore, the impact of his synthesis upon St Maximus notwithstanding, given the latter's extensive familiarity with the Cappadocians<sup>39</sup> we can confidently assert that Nemesisius' work cannot represent the primary source of the theory under consideration. Before moving any further, one more point is in order, which emerges from the previous discussion. I noted earlier that Thunberg's belief in a ministry of unification exercised by humankind, upon which Nemesisius would have supposedly philosophised, finds no textual confirmation. Indeed, what we see at the end of the first chapter of his work<sup>40</sup> does not match either the amplitude or the vigour of the Confessor's elaborations. Although he reiterated the ontological convergence of the realms in the human microcosm – as pondered by the two Gregories – Nemesisius' synthesis did not add to their contributions and cannot be taken as a significant advancement of the idea.

I turn now to the scholarly opinion regarding the dependence of the theory of everything on St Gregory of Nyssa as its major inspiration. It should be noted from the outset that the Confessor's profuse drawing on St Basil's younger brother is doubtless. That said, when dealing with *Difficulty* 41 and the theory of everything found therein, the idea of St Maximus relying on St Gregory of Nyssa instead of the Theologian does not make much sense. This observation emerges from basic hermeneutical principles requiring any given paragraph to be considered above all within its immediate literary context. As a matter of fact, the earlier *Book of Difficulties* (written around 630 in North Africa and dedicated to John of Cyzicus)<sup>41</sup> mainly addresses aporetic passages from St Gregory the Theologian and

<sup>37</sup> Cf. St Gregory of Nazianzus, *Festal Orations*, Popular Patristics, trans. with introd. by Nonna Verna Harrison (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), 67-68.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Telfer, "General Introduction" to *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesisius of Emesa* (quoted above), 206.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. George C. Berthold, 'The Cappadocian Roots of Maximus the Confessor,' in Felix Heinzer and Christoph Schönborn (eds.), *Maximus Confessor* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1982): 51-59.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Nemesisius, *Treatise on the Nature of Man*, 1.10 (Telfer, 254-56).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. *Book of Difficulties*, prologue (PG 91, 1064B). For a chronology of the Maximian corpus, see Angelo Di Berardino (ed.), *Patrology: The Eastern Fathers from the Council of Chalcedon (451) to John of Damascus (750)* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2006), 137-48, esp. 139 and 142.

is obviously meant as an interpretive framework for the latter's thought. Florovsky pointed out aptly that the *Book of Difficulties* is the first patristic attempt to consistently interpret the Gregorian legacy.<sup>42</sup> Speaking from a methodological viewpoint, this interpretive framework shows the Theologian as a main source for St Maximus' theory, not the Nyssen or any other author, for that matter. True, the *Book of Difficulties* is enriched by a few explicit references to other authors (although not St Gregory of Nyssa) yet this by no means changes its focus. Therefore, even though the relevant works of the two Church fathers, i.e. the Nyssen and the Theologian, were published within the same timeframe of the years 379 and 380,<sup>43</sup> the hermeneutical significance of the context should take precedence.

Now, let us verify whether or not the evoked hermeneutical principles have been observed by St Maximus. To give just an example, in the later *Difficulties* (dedicated to a presbyter Thomas and published only a few years after the original *Book of Difficulties*) the Confessor pondered the 'theandric' Christ in chapters 2-4,<sup>44</sup> without mentioning the technical term. The cause of his avoiding the term is straightforward and very relevant here: by all accounts, St Gregory the Theologian – whose Christological thinking was considered there – never employed the term 'theandric' or its derivatives, instead preferring the synonymous 'composite.' Nevertheless, when St Maximus explored in chapter 5<sup>45</sup> a passage from the Dionysian corpus, he made abundant use of the term 'theandric,' which pertained to it. We can surmise from this example that, similarly, the Confessor interpreted the Gregorian phrase mentioned above, which served as a pretext for *Difficulty* 41, within the context where it belonged, namely the Theophany sermons of St Gregory the Theologian. This conclusion stands even though the phrase of interest (a poetic metaphor of the incarnation) has no explicit cosmological bearing; indeed, there would have been no reason for St Maximus to rely on the Nyssen or any other author in order to clarify what the Theologian meant. In fact, any direct use in *Difficulty* 41 of ideas from other authors, like St Gregory of Nyssa, remains improbable. My conviction is

<sup>42</sup> See his *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century* (Vaduz: BUCHER-Vertriebsanstalt, 1987), 116.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Anna M. Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters – Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 40; Brian E. Daley, SJ, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 117.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. PG 91, 1036D-1045C; CCSG 48, 8-18. See also Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua to Thomas, Second Letter to Thomas*, intro., trans. and notes by Joshua Lollar, *Corpus Christianorum in Translation* 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 52-61.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. PG 91, 1045D-1060D; CCSG 48, 19-34. Cf. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua to Thomas, Second Letter to Thomas* (quoted above), 5-74.



based on the fact that toward the end of the chapter St Maximus did refer to another source, i.e. the Dionysian *On the Divine Names*, mentioning the author by name.<sup>46</sup> Thus, in the event of his drawing on the Nyssen's ideas, the Confessor should have also named the author, which he did not. All these observations lead to the conclusion that for his elaborations in *Difficulty* 41 St Maximus was primarily indebted to St Gregory the Theologian. True, *Oration* 38.11 conveys almost the same message as the first passage referred to by Louth in Nyssa's *Against Eunomius* (see above). There is however a notable difference between the two texts; whereas *Oration* 38.11 mainly deals with the Platonic division of being, St Gregory of Nyssa distinguished within the intelligible the ultimate rift between created and uncreated. That said, when treating the realm of 'theology' (the inner life of God) and the angelic beings in the broader context of *Oration* 38.7-10,<sup>47</sup> the Theologian made the same sharp distinction between the divine and the created.

Regarding the second text evoked by Louth, pointing out the ignorance of creation as perceived by the Nyssen, indeed a feature reiterated by *Difficulty* 41,<sup>48</sup> it should be noted that this teaching was shared by all Cappadocian fathers. It recurrently emerged within their respective anti-Eunomian discourses<sup>49</sup> and we also find it in *Oration* 38.7, in the very context of interest here. One way or the other, the Theologian's legacy cannot be ignored in our quest for the sources of the Maximian theory of everything, and to it I now turn.

### **Antecedents of the Maximian Theory in St Gregory the Theologian**

Before moving to the analysis of the relevant passages, another significant element should be taken into consideration. We have already noted that the Theologian's sentence which forms the pretext for *Difficulty* 41 ("the natures renew and God becomes man") is taken from *Oration* 39.13, delivered by St Gregory in Constantinople in the northern winter of 380/381, just a few days after *Oration* 38, of immediate interest here. This detail has great hermeneutical import. Indeed, by exploring a wide range of aspects

<sup>46</sup> PG 91, 1312D-1313A.

<sup>47</sup> PG 36, 317B-321C. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gregory of Nazianzus: Rhetor and Philosopher* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 132. I am indebted to Mario Baghos for this reference.

<sup>48</sup> PG 91, 1305A.

<sup>49</sup> See John Behr, *The Formation of Christian Theology*, Vol. 2: *The Nicene Faith*, part 2: 'One of the Holy Trinity' (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 265, 271, 282-90, 334-42 etc.

pertaining to the Lord's Theophany, *Orations* 38-40 constitute a thematically and methodologically consistent, indissoluble whole.<sup>50</sup> For example, *Oration* 38.2<sup>51</sup> elaborates on the same idea as the famous sentence from *Oration* 39.13, and it seems that the latter represents a summary of the former. We cannot ignore this connection when tracing the sources of the Maximian construct back to St Gregory, as it is impossible to imagine that the Confessor, a meticulous researcher of the Gregorian works, was unaware of this link. For this reason even though *Difficulty* 41 does not explicitly refer to *Oration* 38, its influence can be discerned in the subtext of the chapter.

To be sure, as noted by Cooper (see above), St Maximus was very familiar with the Gregorian writing in question, and actually included a large passage from *Oration* 38.11 in his *Difficulty* 7.<sup>52</sup> The passage rendered by the Confessor reads as follows (my translation).<sup>53</sup>

At first, mind (νοῦς) and perception (αἴσθησις)<sup>54</sup> were distinct from one another (ἀπ' ἀλλήλων διακριθέντα), each remaining within their specific boundaries (τῶν ἰδίων ὁρῶν) and bearing in themselves the majesty of the demiurge Logos as silent worshippers and strong preachers of the great work.<sup>55</sup> So far, there was neither a fusion of the two (κρᾶμα ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων) nor a mixing of the opposites (μίξις τῶν ἐναντίων), so as to make known a superior and generous wisdom concerning [created] beings. [Likewise, there was] no knowledge of the whole richness of [divine] goodness. Such [goodness] needing to be made obvious, the craftsman Logos willed to make the man as a single living being which consists of both (ζῶον ἐν ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων), namely the invisible and visible natures.<sup>56</sup> Taking, therefore, the body

<sup>50</sup> PG 36, 312A-425D. Cf. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 117, 127; John A. McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 336-48.

<sup>51</sup> PG 36, 313A-C.

<sup>52</sup> PG 91, 1093D-1096A.

<sup>53</sup> I am indebted to Fr Bogdan Bucur for the suggestions that led to the improvement of my initial version of this passage.

<sup>54</sup> The two terms refer to the classical Platonic stance regarding the two levels of reality, the spiritual one, accessible through contemplation, and the material one, accessible to the sensorial perception.

<sup>55</sup> The idea of this sentence is rehearsed in *Oration* 39.13 (PG 36, 348D), in terms of the addition of the human choir to the heavenly one, so that all creation joins in doxology.

<sup>56</sup> Regarding this paradoxical aspect, it is true that St Gregory of Nyssa brought further clarification by speaking of the human being as "an intermediary (μέσον) between the divine and bodiless nature and the irrational and animal life" (*On the Making of Man* 16.9; PG 44, 181BC). This phrase, to my knowledge not considered by those seeking in the Nyssen the antecedents of the Maximian theory, stirred the interest of Peter C.



from the already structured matter (παρὰ τῆς ὕλης προϋποστάσης) and blowing out from himself the breath (πνοήν) – which according to Scripture is the conscious soul and the image of God – he placed on earth the human being as a kind of second world, great within the small one (τινα κόσμον δεύτερον, ἐν μικρῷ μέγαν), another angel, a composite worshipper.

The passage presents the human being as a connection between the visible and the invisible sides of creation, both sides converging within the composite architecture of our nature. In its original setting, the text continues with a series of paradoxical statements about the human condition and vocation, like the challenging assertion referring to our call to deification in spite of our humble makeup.<sup>57</sup> These statements represent the peak of a complex and holistic worldview, which incorporates – or rather is incorporated into – a theological and mystical anthropology that in turn functions like an interpretive tool. Indeed, when considered from the zenith of this symbolic or cumulative anthropology (human nature being the second and great world which recapitulates or encompasses the universe), the created cosmos unfolds in layers of unions and distinctions. For instance, just as the one human being is made of body and soul, similarly the one universe comprises the visible and the invisible. The theme of an anthropocosmic convergence from the cited passage reappears in *Oration* 40.5,<sup>58</sup> deprived of paradoxical nuances, in a context that anticipates the Maximian theory even further. There, St Gregory enumerated a series of “lights,” from the “supreme, unapproachable and ineffable” radiance of the Holy Trinity to its created reflections in the angelic orders, the humankind and its elite, the saints (who are more Godlike, θεοειδέστεροι, than the rest of us), and in the first created light, which pervades the universe. This inventory of the ranges of “light” echoes the basic elements of the Maximian theory, although the tensions contemplated by the Confessor and the quoted passage from *Oration* 38.11 find no real correspondent in the last sermon on Theophany.

Returning to *Oration* 38.11, which presents the human being within a cosmic setting and as bridging the two sides of reality, the intelligible and the sensible, we discover a familiar topic. We already encountered these aspects in the analysis of the Maximian theory. The similarities between the two accounts do not end here. Like the soteriological framework of the ‘theory of everything,’ as represented by *Difficulty* 41, the context of the

Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 160.

<sup>57</sup> See the whole paragraph in PG 36, 322C-324B.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. PG 36, 364BC.

paragraph of interest here constitutes a comprehensive narrative of creation and salvation.<sup>59</sup> Thus, *Oration* 38.9-10<sup>60</sup> describes the making of the angelic and visible domains; chapter 11 introduces the human being as an interface for the two realms, also pointing to its vocation to deification;<sup>61</sup> chapter 12<sup>62</sup> narrates the paradisaical experience and the existential failure of humankind; and, finally, chapter 13<sup>63</sup> presents the antidote of this failure as administered by the divine pedagogy in history, culminating in the incarnation of God the Logos.

Looking closely to our text, *Oration* 38.11 evokes two of the five Maximian polarities – the second and the fifth – which refer to the intelligible and the sensible, and the human being (the latter, however, without the gender connotations of the Confessor’s theory). The Gregorian passage ends with the paradox of the human being as a second and greater cosmos, which in its complex architecture contains – and transcends<sup>64</sup> – the perfectly articulated wholeness of the universe. This very aspect is similar to the Confessor’s vision that depicts the unified and perfected universe as “like another human being” (καθάπερ ἄνθρωπον ἄλλον).<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the two accounts do not coincide in all respects. The main difference consists in that whereas the synthesis of the intelligible and the sensible in St Gregory occurs within the psychosomatic makeup of the human nature, in St Maximus this detail is implied but not stated.<sup>66</sup> Beside this variance, the

<sup>59</sup> For a summary of the oration, see McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus*, 338-39. For an analysis of the context pertaining to *Oration* 38 (and related works), in a complex theological, anthropological and cosmological perspective, see Radford Ruether, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 130-36.

<sup>60</sup> PG 36, 320C-321C. See a few remarks on this group of chapters, extended to 7-11, in Christopher A. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 117-18.

<sup>61</sup> For the human being as a connector of the visible and invisible, and as called to union with God, see Kenneth Paul Wesche, ‘The Union of God and Man in Jesus Christ in the Thought of Gregory of Nazianzus,’ *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 28:2 (1984): 83-98, esp. 91-92. On the Gregorian concept of deification, see Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, ‘Theosis according to Gregory,’ in Jostein Børtnes and Tomas Hägg (eds.), *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press and University of Copenhagen, 2006): 257-70. Cf. Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 116-22.

<sup>62</sup> PG 36, 324B-D.

<sup>63</sup> PG 36, 325A-D.

<sup>64</sup> An idea clearly stated in *Oration* 39.8 (PG 36, 341D): we are called to “pass over creation (τὴν κτίσιν ὑπερاناβῆναι).”

<sup>65</sup> *Difficulty* 41 (PG 91, 1312A).

<sup>66</sup> St Maximus reiterates more clearly the Gregorian approach in *Mystagogy*, 7 (PG 91, 684D-685A).

two fathers convey a common message: there is a close connection between human existence and the cohesion of the cosmos. This conclusion allows for a fertile reading of their ideas in dialogue with the modern notion of the anthropic cosmological principle, which specifically points to this connection as a condition for the very life of the universe.

Moving to the second paragraph of interest, in *Oration* 38.17,<sup>67</sup> we encounter a very different, yet not unrelated, approach. The whole chapter continues the line of thought set by chapter 4, which sums up the significance of Christ's incarnation as a recapitulation of God's people in the main acts of salvation.<sup>68</sup> The significant difference between chapters 4 and 17 consists in that whilst the former addresses the anthropological aspect of salvation, the latter elaborates within the broader framework of cosmology, thus reiterating the approach of the analysed passage from chapter 11. Indeed, chapter 17 consists of a doxological summary of the events recounted by the Nativity narratives, interpreting the salvific deeds as means by which Christ achieved the union of heaven and earth, and of everything else. This approach, which gives substance to Wesche's note that "communion with God is the heart of Gregory's theological intuition" concerning the mystery of Christ<sup>69</sup> – corresponds to the Maximian musings on Christ as mediator.<sup>70</sup> The same interpretation receives further endorsement in *Oration* 39.16, where Christ appears as "lifting up (συναναφέρει) the cosmos together with him."<sup>71</sup> Again, the Gregorian passage should be considered in its immediate setting, of chapters 13 (second half) to 16,<sup>72</sup> for which it serves as a conclusion. The passages explore the mystery of Christ as the Godman, who by his kenosis brought the uncreated and the created to their utmost proximity, for the benefit of the latter. The kenosis of the Logos incarnate is rendered in powerful tones, through a series of antinomies – such as "the uncreated one is created, the limitless one is bounded"<sup>73</sup> etc. – meant to prevent any unilateral misinterpretation. Chapters 14 and 15<sup>74</sup> in fact defend the mystery by articulating the unity of Godhead and humankind in the one

<sup>67</sup> PG 36, 329D-332B.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *Oration* 38.4 (PG 36, 316AB).

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Wesche, 'The Union of God and Man in Jesus Christ,' 90.

<sup>70</sup> PG 91, 1308D-1312B.

<sup>71</sup> PG 36, 353A.

<sup>72</sup> PG 36, 325B-329C. For a few remarks on these chapters, see Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 123-24.

<sup>73</sup> Literally, in the original: ὁ ἀκτιστος κτίζεται, καὶ ὁ ἀχώρητος χωρεῖται; *Oration* 38.13 (PG 36, 325C). See also *Oration* 39.13 (PG 36, 349A).

<sup>74</sup> PG 36, 328A-329B.

person of the “twofold” (διπλοῦς) Christ.<sup>75</sup> Closer to the text of interest, in chapter 16 St Gregory made a crucial point, highlighting the meaning of the festal season as a revelation of the main and single reason (κεφάλαιον ἐν) behind the mystery of incarnation: to achieve “my perfection, my reshaping and my return to the first Adam (πρὸς τὸν πρῶτον Ἀδὰμ ἐπάνοδος).”<sup>76</sup> With this last statement, which, in light of *Oration* 39.2,<sup>77</sup> I read as referring to a return to Adam’s (unifying) vocation, we are led to the theory of everything.

Very likely, despite St Gregory not referring to any macrocosmic echoes of the deterioration of the human sphere (an aspect far better emphasised by the Confessor),<sup>78</sup> the understanding of the liturgical festival as both a reminder and restoration of humanity’s vocation indicates such connection with the theory. This nuance is confirmed by *Oration* 40, which presents the festal season of Theophany as reaching a climax in the baptismal mystery of our rebirth in Christ, the baptismal waters appearing in turn as restoring the upward orientation of creation (πλάσματος ἐπανάρθωσις).<sup>79</sup> Moreover, the feast provides God’s people with an opportunity to foster solidarity and thus strengthen humankind’s communion.<sup>80</sup> Further developed by St Maximus,<sup>81</sup> traces of this understanding can be discerned in the depiction of Christ as bringing about the union of the created and the uncreated, and of all the realms within the confines of creation. This has been from the outset the task appointed to humankind, although the Theologian did not say this explicitly; instead, St Maximus filled this gap, as we have seen, by stating that humanity’s fall is tantamount to our failure to unite the realms, and that in Christ we are given a new chance to accomplish this task. St Gregory showed however a similar grasp when pointing out that in liturgising,<sup>82</sup> in celebrating the salvation wrought by Christ we truly join together all the realms. He thus exhorted,

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *Oration* 38.15 (PG 36, 328C).

<sup>76</sup> *Oration* 38.16 (PG 36, 329C).

<sup>77</sup> Cf. *Oration* 39.2 (PG 36, 336B). The text reads (my translation): “It is the time of rebirth; let us be born from above. It is the time of remaking; let us put on the first Adam (τὸν πρῶτον Ἀδὰμ ἀναλάβωμεν). Let us not remain the way we are but let us become what we were.”

<sup>78</sup> Cf. *Difficulty* 41 (PG 91, 1308C).

<sup>79</sup> Cf. *Oration* 40.3 (PG 36, 361B). The ascending dimension is reinforced in 40.45 (PG 36, 424B), which speaks of Christ as taking up the believers to heaven.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. *Oration* 40.31 (PG 36, 401D-404C).

<sup>81</sup> Cf. *Difficulty* 41 (PG 91, 1308C-1312B).

<sup>82</sup> The idea is reiterated in *Oration* 39.13 (cf. my n.55 above). On the liturgical dimension, briefly, Tollefsen, ‘Theosis according to Gregory,’ 265.

Glorify [Christ] with the shepherds; sing hymns with angels; dance with the archangels! Let this festival be common to the heavenly and earthly powers (κοινή πανήγυρις οὐρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων δυνάμεων). For I believe that they together rejoice and celebrate today.<sup>83</sup>

Inspired by the worshiping milieu, taken as a meeting place for the angelic and human choirs, St Gregory's vision (preceding by a century the Dionysian liturgical mysticism) reveals the Christian background of the theory of everything. Centuries after the Theologian, St Maximus reiterated this holistic worldview, by including the union of the angelic and cosmic realms as the fourth stage of the unifying process,<sup>84</sup> and by representing the liturgy as a union of angelic and human doxologies.<sup>85</sup>

## Closing Remarks

This article has critically reviewed the main scholarly arguments referring to the patristic antecedents of the Maximian theory of everything, as depicted in *Difficulty* 41. We discovered that despite the established scholarly consensus, the Confessor did not primarily build upon St Gregory of Nyssa and Nemesius of Emesa's respective writings, even though their influence cannot be ignored. Instead, we discerned that St Gregory the Theologian's thought played a more significant role than previously admitted by scholars, both from the viewpoint of the idea of the realms as united around the human being and the liturgical framework of the whole theory. It has likewise become clear that St Maximus was not a servile imitator of the Theologian. Whilst the relevant passages from St Gregory, beyond their daring turns, depict a static and ontological icon of reality – inspired by the classical concept of man as microcosm and the theory of recapitulation – the Confessor offered a dynamic perspective, existential in nature. In light of this development, the human being does not simply reflect the structure of the universe, as St Gregory held, but represents instead a structuring force at work in the world. Apart from these differences, the time has come to give due credit to St Gregory the Theologian as an antecedent of the Maximian theory of everything.

<sup>83</sup> *Oration* 38.17 (PG 36, 332AB). Cf. *Oration* 39.14 (PG 36, 349C).

<sup>84</sup> Cf. *Difficulty* 41 (PG 91, 1308A).

<sup>85</sup> Cf. *Mystagogy*, 24 (PG 91, 709BC).