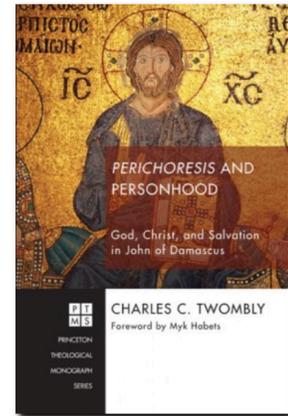


Perichoresis and Personhood

A Summary Review

Charles C. Twombly's *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus* is a must-read for those who wish to plunge the depths of Trinitarian theology, Christology and our union with Christ in salvation. With the recent surge of discussions and publications around the Trinity, and noting the "virtual non-existence of extensive work on the theme of perichoresis" (p xi), Twombly's book makes a significant contribution toward filling this gap by setting his sights on the invaluable work of John Damascene (circa 675 – circa 749CE).

My reason for picking up this book is that I was seeking a greater precision on the term perichoresis as it applied to my readings on the Trinity and Christology. While the term is used regularly (mainly in Trinitarian studies), there is considerable ambiguity when it is used and only a dim light shines on its import. One [attempt](#) breaks the term apart showing that "peri means 'around,' and chorea means 'dance.'" Thus, perichoresis refers to the "interrelatedness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" and can be understood as a "divine dance" where the "Three-in-one participate in a never-beginning, never-ending movement in harmony." This is helpful, but still vague.



After a substantial and important "Introduction" (Chapter 1), the book takes shape by way of three major divisions: "Perichoresis and the Trinity" (Chapter 2), "Perichoresis and Christ" (Chapter 3), and "Perichoresis and Salvation" (Chapter 3), followed by an Epilogue that sums the work and urges creative ways of deploying perichoresis into additional theological themes.

As applied to the Trinity, perichoresis (mutual indwelling) entails "union without confusion" or "identity and difference." As Twombly says, "intrinsic to any theological use of the term perichoresis, regardless of the context, is some sort of relationship" (p 11) and perichoresis is the chosen term used to describe the unique relationship that exists amongst the hypostaseis (persons) of the one Triune God.

Any preliminary work on the quest to apprehend the incomprehensible Triune God must embrace our conceptual limitations, says John Damascene. Though the created order, Scripture, revelation of the Son, and witness of the Spirit given us, they only partially reveal God's being to us. "God's nature is fundamentally unknowable" and "God remains beyond our reach" (p 15).

The oft-used mechanism of analogy falls short in explicating God's Triune nature, since the sheer qualitative uniqueness of God exposes the chasm between the Creator and the created order. After all, "creation comes forth, not out of God's own substance but is made out of nothing and is therefore out of that which is not God" (p 17). Thus, creation can only point to God's existence and

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that by way of inference. Sans Scripture, and the presuppositions that are shared about it, creation remains a “barren source” of information about the nature and character of God. Since “there is no way of reasoning backwards from creation to the character of God’s ousia,” the mind, unaided by an established interpretation of Scriptural revelation, is only capable of grasping some amorphous uncaused cause of the universe (cf., pp 23-24).

Likewise, while humans create, they do so out of existing materials, whereas God creates out of nothing. Where humans beget in time and only with the help of another, God begets eternally and single-handedly. Even Scripture is remiss in giving a complete picture of God’s nature and character. While Scripture affirms that God is powerful, just, good, et al., the line between what God does and what God is remains so thin that we are left with the external operations of God while the inner nature of God’s being remains hidden. As a simple, indivisible being God is not a composite of those qualities to which Scripture points, because God has no “parts.” Moreover, Holy Writ intimates an apophatic theology telling us more about what God is not, than what God is in his essence. God is not finite, not created, not limited in power, not with a body, et al. (cf., p 22).

Historically significant and theologically rich is Twombly’s observation that as Chalcedon (5th Century) utilized language to show “how things brought together in union could nevertheless remain distinct” in relation to Christology, so too did John Damascene (8th Century) employ those same conceptual constructs to explicate a theology of the Triune God (p 28). Thus, we are enabled to know more of God by way of our knowledge of Christ. This is only fitting, since Christ reveals God ([Matt 11:27](#)).

With regards to the ontological Trinity, Twombly notes that “will and operation reside in the common nature or essence and not in the hypostaseis individually.” In fact, “the only thing that really distinguishes the three hypostaseis from one another is the manner of their respective origins. What binds them together, inseparably, in common substance, action, and so on, is ‘their existence in one another,’ their mutual indwelling that is summed up by the single word, perichoresis” (pp 31-32).

Aside from the direct hit on the monothelite controversy in which Christ was said to have two wills (dyothelitism), this distinction amongst the hypostaseis, viz., their origin, combats modalism. How so? John Damascene declares that the hypostaseis “are one in all things save in the being unbegotten, the being begotten, and the procession” (p 37, note 93 for reference). We know this by way of revelation but how this is so remains a mystery.

Nevertheless, some explanation cries out and Twombly notes: The Father is “ontologically prior” (not chronologically since the Son is eternally begotten) and, therefore, has no cause. There is no sense in which the Father existed before the Son, since that would entail a time in which the Father

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was not father. Any point at which the Son was suddenly begotten would entail some change in God, which is impossible for an immutable being. The Son, on the other hand, does have a cause, but since the same substance and will is shared with the Father, then, coextensively, the Son is eternally begotten (not created). The Spirit eternally proceeds (that is, not begotten) from the Father and through the Son (contra the West and the [filioque addition](#)) as the Son “imparts” or “communicates” the Spirit on behalf of the Father (pp 38-39).

Though almost four centuries separated Chalcedon and John of Damascus, and much debate continued in the centuries between, it was the language of Chalcedon that provided the conceptual framework for John of Damascus to articulate how perichoresis “functions then as a summing up, a condensation, of an important aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity expressed in Chalcedonian terms” (p 42). Perichoresis serves to unite “the one ousia with the three hypostaseis without confusion, blending, mingling, composition, change, or division of substance” (p 45). The divine dance of perichoresis illustrates “how three might be one and how both variety and unity can characterize the same divine reality” (p 46).

Setting the stage for the second chapter “Perichoresis and Christ”, Twombly begins by describing the “genuine advances” in christological development since Chalcedon (pp 48-53). I have to say that those already familiar with Chalcedonian (451 CE) and its import will readily find these few pages a gold mine of Christian history and worth the price of the book. There is so much in this chapter (all of which deserves a careful reading), but I can only focus on a few major themes that arise from it.

First, Twombly zeroes in on the terms physis (nature; traits of a species) and hypostasis (person; individual instance of a physis) and notes a fine distinction between ousia (being in itself; substance/essence) and physis (a kind or form of being). The result is a taxonomy that moves from general to specific such that an ousia → physis → hypostasis. Inductively speaking, all persons (individual instances) share in a nature (traits common to a species) which make up a common substance. Deductively speaking and in Twombly terms,

There is, therefore, a narrowing of range as one moves from being, the most general category, through nature, as the category marking off the peculiar character of a specific species, to hypostaseis or person (better: individual), as the term for specifying a particular manifestation of some species.

There is a common nature, then, a nature with its own “natural” traits, that runs through a species. An individual within that species may have “accidental” traits that underscore its individuality, but it will, at the same time, embody characteristics common to the species as a whole. (pp 59-60)

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How this taxonomy bears on the John Damascene's Christology becomes clear. One conclusion that is unpacked throughout the chapter is the ontological priority of the divine nature over the human nature such that the former "pervades" the latter but not vice versa. Nevertheless, there remains a measure of "reciprocity" between the two natures lest we commit the monophysite error. Additional terms given clarity of meaning include: nous (mind) that controls psyche (soul), which in turn controls soma (body), yet "without any of these elements being obliterated or suffering essential alteration in the process, so that the Logos may be viewed as embracing all of the human aspects without reducing any of them to insignificance" (pp 69-70).

Of particular interest is the use of science to illustrate the relationship of the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures by a "union by composition" (pp 72-74). Drawing from the late Israeli scientist and historian Samuel Sambursky, Twombly shows how Aristotelian and later Stoic physics provide a model. For Aristotle a "mixture lacked a homogeneous character, because the attempt to mix two or more [solid] ingredients apparently resulted in mosaic-like composition" (e.g., wheat and barley). A mixture of liquids presented the opposite problem such that "the weaker of two [liquid] substances is assimilated to the strong and virtually disappears" (a drop of wine in water). On the former model, we venture toward the Nestorian error, whereas on the later model we broach the monophysite error in Christology.

Instead, the Stoics provided a better example by noting a third type of mixture. Rather than a "mingling" of ingredients (Aristotle's first type above) or a "fusion" of ingredients (the second type), there is a "total mixture" such that a "complete interpenetration of all the components takes place."

Any volume of the mixture, down to the smallest parts, is jointly occupied by all the components in the same proportion, each component preserving its own properties under any circumstances, irrespective of the ratio of its share in the mixture"
(emphasis his; cf. p 74 for source).

While not ideal, this model of "total mixture" has many elements that align with an orthodox Christology. As John of Damascus insists, while the Trinity may be lacking in analogous heuristics, the Incarnation offers some similarities between what God has done in Christ and this world.

There are many other topics addressed in this chapter that are crucial and continue to have significant influence upon an orthodox Christology. Although I cannot take the time here to rehearse their details, these topics include: the relationship of the human will to human nature vis-a-vis human person; whether or not Christ had two wills or one and the corresponding questions around the suffering of God in Gethsemane; how one can be truly human without a human father and the related issue around Mary as "Theotokos"; the dynamic (versus static) interplay between

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the two natures of Christ as they “dwell within each other without confusion;” the distinction between the act/exercising of a will vis-a-vis the fact/reality of a will.

Perichoresis or “mutual indwelling” is the summary expression that explicates how the two distinct natures of the one Person ‘dance’ in concert while simultaneously “act conjointly, with each nature doing in communion with the other that which is proper to itself” (p 86).

The final chapter is titled “Perichoresis and Salvation” (the chapter title). Previously I noted how Twombly shows that perichoresis was explicitly used by John of Damascus to illustrate “how three might be one and how both variety and unity can characterize the same divine reality” (p 46) and that perichoresis as “mutual indwelling” is the summary expression that explicates the two distinct natures of the one Person Christ. This chapter ties together the notion of “participation” (metalapsis) with perichoresis under the semantic umbrella of “communion” (koinonia), though important and careful distinctions are retained. Although John does not use the term perichoresis “to identify the bond that exist between God and the created world or the saving relationship that unites baptized believers to God (or Christ or eternal life),” there is nevertheless “some connection between the bringing together of Christ’s two natures, on the one hand, and the connection of humanity and God either in creation or in salvation, on the other” (p 93). It is this theme that occupies the final chapter. The rites of baptism and the Eucharist along with our personal union with Christ and the corporate union we share with one another are prime models used by John of Damascus to illustrate.

For example, “the duality of the relationship between Christ and the baptized person has the element of identity and difference that is at the root of perichoresis. Union without confusion is the structural analogue that at the same time provides the space for significant differences.” And, “even though the vocabulary of mutual indwelling is available for use, John employs words like participation and communion to speak of the connection brought about by the consecrated bread and wine” (p 101). It is by way of these two sacraments that our participation with one another in the one Body of Christ is manifest. Broadly speaking, we enjoy both a union with Christ and a communion with one another in a perichoretic relationship that retains both identity and difference. John of Damascus writes (p 102):

It is called participation [metalapsis] because through it we participate [metalambanomen] in the divinity of Jesus. It is also called communion [koinonia], and is truly so, because of our having communion through it with Christ and partaking [metechein] both of his flesh and his divinity, and because through it we have communion with and reunited to one another. For, since we partake of one bread, we all become one body of Christ and one blood and members of one another and are accounted of the same body with Christ.

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Related to the idea of “participation,” Twombly makes an important apologetic move that, as I see it, avoids panentheism. He notes that “participation bespeaks of a relativity, a separateness of the participant from that in which it participates” (p 94). Just as, for example, “the sun shines down on the earth but seemingly remains unaffected by what transpires on the surface of the earth, so God creates and sustains creation but in a unilateral manner that precludes reciprocal influence.” And so, “God is in some way united with the world in a fashion that is absolutely crucial for creaturely existence, but that leaves the divine nature unaltered” (p 96). We have Plato to thank as much as we have the Cappadocians in this regard.

There is much more in this final chapter, touching on topics such as the Fall, immortality, imago Dei, et al. My conclusion is the same as my beginning, to wit: *Perichoresis and Personhood* is a must-read for those who wish to plunge the depths of Trinitarian theology, Christology, and our union with Christ in salvation. *Tolle lege!!*