

PROBLEMS WITH PERICHORESIS

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Summary

The doctrine of perichoresis has been important for a number of contemporary theologians. However, it has been given much less philosophical attention. This essay is a philosophical-theological examination of the doctrine of perichoresis. Whereas most contemporary theologians who write about perichoresis restrict its application to the Holy Trinity, this paper seeks to address the question of its relevance for the hypostatic union in Christology. In order to do this, perichoresis in the incarnation must be distinguished from the communication of attributes and from the way in which it is applied to the persons of the Godhead. I conclude that perichoresis has an important though often neglected use in Christology, as well as a right use in trinitarian theology.

1. Introduction

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, 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, mutually co-inhering in a hypostatic union?

This essay is an attempt to make 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 a complete 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,

[I]t 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.¹

Nevertheless, it seems to me that trying to understand what perichoresis means with application to the incarnation and Trinity is a worthwhile enterprise, even if it is not possible to fully 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 only know in faltering and partial ways, the mysteries of God. Thus theologising and philosophising about these matters must be tempered with humility in the face of the incomprehensibility of divine mystery.

¹ See Peter van Inwagen, ‘And Yet There Are Not Three Gods But One God’ in *Philosophy and The Christian Faith* ed. Thomas V. Morris (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988): 243.

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 the incarnation, and *person-perichoresis*, denoting the perichoretic relations that exist between the persons of the Trinity.² 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 essay is to attempt to analyse perichoresis in order to show which versions of this doctrine are coherent, and which are not. We shall examine both of these versions of perichoresis, beginning with nature-perichoresis and the person of Christ.

2. 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.³ 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

² Richard Swinburne points out the Greek terms for these two doctrines in *The Christian God* (Oxford: University Press, 1993): 209, n. 20. They are *perichoresis phuseon* and *perichoresis hypostaton* respectively. I have not followed Swinburne in this designation, though it has the imprimature of patristic theology, because it seems to be rather confusing to talk about the hypostatic union of Christ and *phusic perichoresis* on the one hand, and the perichoretic relations in the Trinity as *hypostatic* on the other. Besides, as Prof. 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.

³ See, for example, Randall Otto, 'The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis in Recent Theology' in *SJT* 54 (2001): 366-84, G. L. Prestige, 'ΠΕΡΙΧΟΡΕΩ and ΠΕΡΙΧΟΡΕΣΙΣ in The Fathers' in *JTS* 29 (1928): 242-52 and Richard Cross, 'Christological Predication in John of Damascus' in *Mediaeval Studies* 62 (2000): 69-124. My rendition of the historical material owes much to these three articles.

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, '[j]ust as the natures are mixed, so also the names pass reciprocally into each other by the principle of this coalescence.'⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶

It is important to note that, in this early version of nature-perichoresis, there is no clear notion of interpenetration. 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*. In the process he introduced the notion of interpenetration into the discussion of the doctrine. 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.⁷

⁴ Gregory, *Epistle 101*, in *PG 37.181C*, cited in Randall Otto, 'The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis': 368.

⁵ Randall Otto, 'The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis'.

⁶ Prestige, 'ΠΕΡΙΧΟΡΕΩ and ΠΕΡΙΧΟΡΕΣΙΣ in The Fathers': 243. Compare Otto, who cites Maximus as follows, 'the human nature interpenetrates the divine nature, to which it is united without any confusion.' From *Ambiguorum Liber* 112b, PG 91. 1053, in Randall Otto, 'The Use and Abuse of Perichoresis': 369.

⁷ See Cross' article, 'Christological Predication in John of Damascus' for a more nuanced account of this.

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, whilst holding the two natures together in the hypostatic union without confusing or conflating them – for instance, the apparently contradictory character 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 explaining how it is that they are 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.⁸

2.1 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 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 amongst the villagers and that he is all-knowing and yet ignorant of the time of his second coming, and

⁸ Donald Macleod says that nature-perichoresis was never taken up by the Church. 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: IVP, 1998): 194.

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’.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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

Weak communicatio idiomatum: Definition: The attribution of the properties of both of the natures of Christ to the person of Christ, such that the *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 natures and without confusing or commingling the two natures of Christ or the generation of a *tertium quid*.

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. 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 divine nature.

⁹ See Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan, 1960), Bk. III, Pt. 1, § 1, ch. 5, § 21: 161.

¹⁰ T. H. Bindley, *The Ecumenical Documents of The Faith, Fourth Edition* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1950): 226.

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 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. So, for example, in his developed views on the matter Luther says:

[T]he 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.¹¹

One way of construing this is to say that there is a real transfer of 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.¹² 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. 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.

Let an individual nature denote an abstract set of properties which, held by a particular property-bearer – a substance – individuates that particular thing.¹³ Now, if the two natures of Christ share all and only

¹¹ Luther's *Works*, vol. 22: 491-2, cited in Dennis Ngien, 'Chalcedonian Christology and Beyond: Luther's Understanding of The Communicatio Idiomatum' in *Heythrop Journal* 45 (2004): 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.'

¹² See Ngien, 'Chalcedonian Christology and Beyond'. The characterisation of the Lutheran position I expound is owed to Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988 [1939]): 325-36. For a standard (conservative) Lutheran account of the communication of attributes, see Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics Vol. II* (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia, 1951): 129 ff.

¹³ An individual nature or essence is to be distinguished from a kind nature or 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 natures, 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 nature essentially, but his divine

the same properties as each other, then they are the same nature. 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. 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 into one. So if Luther means to suggest that all the properties of the two natures of Christ are shared together via some transference of properties in the hypostatic union, and there are no properties that one or other nature shares that are not held in common via the hypostatic union, then the two natures are, in fact, fused into a third nature in the hypostatic union.

Of course, defenders of a strong version of the communication of attributes need not believe this. Luther himself was not consistent on this matter, and probably some of what he says in this regard should be taken as rhetorical flourish or hyperbole, rather than sober metaphysics. But even if a defender of the strong view of the communication of attributes were to claim only that the two natures of Christ share many but not all of their properties in the hypostatic union via the transfer of certain properties, and that this is what the communication of attributes means, this is also false. For this would entail that, say, the divine nature is simultaneously omnipresent and physically limited, and omnipotent but limited in power, and so on. And it would mean that the human nature was simultaneously limited in power but also omnipotent, and physically limited but also omnipresent, which is obviously nonsense.

It could be that only two properties are shared in the hypostatic union between the two natures, one from each of the two natures, and

nature contingently. This view has been defended in the recent literature by Thomas Morris. See *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986): chs. 2-3.

that each of these two properties denotes a different sort of power or ability, which the nature from whom the property is transferred possesses. This would be the case where omnipresence via the divine nature and limited power, via the human nature, were the only two properties shared in the hypostatic union. But although it does not seem, *prima facie*, to be metaphysically impossible for one being to have both these properties simultaneously, it is, I take it, metaphysically impossible for the human nature of Christ and the divine nature of Christ to possess both properties individually and together at one and the same time. For then each of the two natures would be powerless and omnipotent simultaneously, and individually. But the divine nature cannot be both omnipresent and powerless without ceasing to be divine because this entails that the divine nature is both omnipotent and limited in power, which is contradictory. But neither can a human nature have both of these properties at one and the same time because a human nature cannot be omnipresent and limited to a particular physical location. Yet this is what this construal of the strong version of communication of attributes requires. So it too, is false.

Some classical Lutheran theologians have taken the view that the transfer of properties according to the strong version of the communication of attributes is unidirectional from the divine to the human nature, not conversely.¹⁴ This would mean that the human nature has properties in common with the divine nature in virtue of the transference of properties in the hypostatic union, but not conversely. But for reasons similar to those just outlined, this will not work either. For as it stands such a conception of strong communication of attributes is ambiguous. It could mean that all the divine attributes are transferred to the human nature of Christ in the hypostatic union, but not conversely. In which case, this is false for reasons similar to those in the version of the Lutheran account where there is a transfer of one or more properties between both natures. A human nature cannot remain a human nature if it has properties such as omnipresence or omnipotence.

Alternatively, this conception of the communication of attributes could mean that some, but not all of the divine attributes are

¹⁴ The so-called *genus maiestaticum* of Lutheran Christology. See Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II*: 152 ff.

transferred from the divine to the human nature in the hypostatic union, but not conversely. Some theologians, perhaps seeing the problems inherent in such ambiguity, have opted for this more parsimonious claim that some but not all properties are transferred from the divine to the human nature. In scholastic theology, this is often done by dividing the divine attributes into two groups. The first group comprises the so-called *operative attributes* of God, such as omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience, the second group, the so-called *quiescent attributes* such as infinity and eternity. It is the operative, not quiescent attributes that are transferred in this way. Then, on this version of the doctrine, the human nature has only *certain* properties in common with the divine nature in virtue of the transference of properties in the hypostatic union, but not conversely, and without confusion of the two natures. This version of the strong doctrine of the communication of attributes appears the most promising. It requires only that one or more, but not all, the properties of the divine nature are transferred to the human nature. But it suffers from the same debilitating problems to do with the real transfer of properties in the hypostatic union.

Even if one takes the parsimonious view that only one of the properties of one of the natures of Christ is transferred to the other nature of Christ, without a similar transfer of one or more properties from the second nature to the first, this seems to have absurd consequences. I shall take two examples, one involving the transfer of a property from the divine to the human nature of Christ and one from the human to the divine nature of Christ, in order to demonstrate that, whichever way the traffic in properties between the two natures goes, the consequence is fatal for the coherence of the doctrine.

First, assume that only one essential property of the divine nature is transferred to the human nature in the hypostatic union. Let us say this one property is omnipresence – a popular choice for Lutherans, who hold to a doctrine of consubstantiation in their sacramental theology of the Eucharist.¹⁵ It follows that, after this property has been transferred

¹⁵ This is a version of a real presence doctrine of the Eucharist. That is, Lutheran sacramental theology states that Christ is really, physically present in the elements of bread and wine at the mass. The formula used by Lutheran theologians is that the body of Christ is corporeally present in, with and under the elements. Hence, consubstantiation. This doctrine was a source of considerable conflict with the Reformed Orthodox. Lutheran theologians applied to the strong version of communication of attributes in order to establish that Christ can be corporeally present in the elements because his body is ubiquitous. It is ubiquitous because this property is transferred from the divine nature to the human nature of Christ in the hypostatic union. Lutherans like Pieper dislike the term ubiquitous, preferring to speak of the

from the divine to the human nature of Christ, the human nature of Christ is omnipresent. That is, from the moment of hypostatic union onward, in all subsequent moments of the existence of Christ, the human nature of Christ is omnipresent. If this property-transfer takes place at the moment of hypostatic union, then, this would seem to be at the moment of the virginal conception of Christ. In which case, there is no prior temporal index at which the human nature of Christ exists without the property of omnipresence, even if there is a logically prior ‘moment’ at which the human nature of Christ exists without this property. And presuming that omnipresence is a property essential to the divine nature, and that the transfer of this property means that the property becomes an essential property in the nature to which it is transferred, then, at all temporal moments after the hypostatic union, the human nature of Christ is essentially omnipresent. But this is obviously false. For then, at every moment after the hypostatic union, Christ’s humanity would exist everywhere – a view the Lutherans embraced in their doctrine of the repletive, or supernatural presence of Christ in the elements of the sacrament, and everywhere else.¹⁶ But it seems to me obviously false that my hand, or the cup of tea I had this morning, or the trees outside this building are interpenetrated in every particle by Christ’s *human* nature. Even if I were disposed to reject the notion that an essential property of human beings is that any human is located in a particular space at a particular time, so that I could claim that Christ’s omnipresent flesh is a strange, but not necessarily metaphysically impossible sort of physicality, this would still have consequences so monumentally counterintuitive that the doctrine would seem to be absurd. Yet this seems to be the obvious consequence of this position.

A similar *reductio ad absurdum* applies to a converse state of affairs. Assume that an essential property of the human nature of

repletive, or supernatural mode of subsistence of Christ’s human nature. See Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II*: 180-81.

¹⁶ Compare Pieper’s characterisation of this property of Christ (citing Luther): ‘a thing is at places repletively, or supernaturally, that is, when something is simultaneously and entirely in all places and fills all places, and is still gauged by no place, or encompassed by no place, where it is.’ *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II*: 181, from Luther, St. L. XX: 949, 951. To which Pieper adds, ‘whoever believes the fact that the human nature [of Christ] was assumed into the Person of the Son of God ... is no longer entitled to deny the omnipresence of Christ’s human nature’.

Christ is transferred to the divine nature of Christ at the moment of hypostatic union. Let us say this property is 'being physically located at only one place at any one particular time'. Then, at the moment of hypostatic union and at all moments thereafter, the divine nature of Christ is physically located at only one place at any one time. In which case, according to classical theology at least, the divine nature of Christ ceases to be divine, since, I take it, an essential property of divinity is being omnipresent. So, even if only one property is involved in this transference from one nature to the other in the hypostatic union (and I have deliberately chosen a property that is important to the Lutheran case), this is metaphysically impossible. Hence, the strong doctrine of the communication of attributes is fatally flawed. Consequently, in the remainder of the argument, we shall assume the weaker, and classical, view of the communication of attributes, rather than a stronger version of the doctrine.

2.2 Nature-perichoresis

As we have already seen, the communication of attributes, in either its weak or strong forms, is sometimes conflated with nature-perichoresis in the theological literature. This is a mistake. The two notions, though related, are distinct. I take it that nature-perichoresis involves an asymmetrical relation between the two natures of Christ. The divine nature of Christ interpenetrates his human nature without confusion and without being mingled with it. But the human nature of Christ does not interpenetrate the divine nature in any way. Moreover, this interpenetration of the human nature by the divine nature of Christ does not involve the transfer of properties from the divine to the human nature. The two natures remain distinct, but united, rather like the oxygen and haemoglobin in oxygenated red blood cells in the human body are chemically distinct, but fused together to make oxyhaemoglobin in order to deliver oxygen to the body efficiently.

This nature-perichoresis could be understood as a special case of the divine interpenetration of the created order on certain views of divine providence. Just as the divine nature might be said to interpenetrate the whole of creation, sustaining it and upholding it at each moment of its continued existence, so also the divine nature of Christ interpenetrates the human nature of Christ, upholding and sustaining it at each moment of its existence. This seems to mean the difference between these two instances of divine interpenetration is one of degree, rather than kind.

John Damascene is credited with developing a notion of nature-perichoresis like this one in his treatise *De fide orthodoxa*. He also seems to advocate a weak version of the communication of attributes (but that need not detain us here¹⁷). Of nature-perichoresis he says:

But observe that although we hold that the natures of the Lord permeate one another, yet we know that the permeation springs from the divine nature. For it is that that penetrates and permeates all things, as it wills, while nothing penetrates it: and it is it, too, that imparts to the flesh its own peculiar glories, while abiding itself impassible and without participation in the affections of the flesh. (*De fide orthodoxa* 3. 7)¹⁸

This clearly expresses the notion of an asymmetrical interpenetration of the human nature by the divine. Leonard Prestige glosses John Damascene's explanation of nature-perichoresis in the following way:

The characteristics of the humanity [of Christ] are unimpaired, and its natural properties are unaltered. Nevertheless divine operations, though they do not proceed *from it*, do proceed *through it*, owing to the union and co-inherence.

That is, human nature is the conduit through which divine nature acts in the person of Christ. This sounds rather monophysite – the heresy that Christ had only one *phusis*, or nature. However, quoth Prestige:

John safeguards himself very carefully from Monophysitism. One result of the co-inherence of the two natures is an interchange or *antidosis*. But this is purely a matter of formality or nomenclature: no properties of either nature are actually transferred through it to the other, but the title derived from either nature may be applied to the Person in whom both natures are united.¹⁹

At first glance, this sounds like the communication of attributes once again. But it is not. The point Prestige is making is that, on Damascene's doctrine of nature-perichoresis, there is no transference of

¹⁷ See *De Fide Orthodoxa* 3.4, and Richard Cross' article, 'Christological Predication in John of Damascus' for a detailed exposition of John Damascene's views.

¹⁸ John Damascene goes beyond this somewhat in a later portion of his treatise: 'The permeation [inhabitation, mutual indwelling] did not come of the flesh but of the divinity: for it is impossible that the flesh should permeate through the divinity: but the divine nature once permeating through the flesh gave also to the flesh the same ineffable power of permeation [*perichorousa*]; and this indeed is what we call union.' See *De fide orthodoxa* 4.18. All citations from *De fide orthodoxa* are taken from Salmond's translation in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Father, Second Series, vol. IX* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 [reprint]).

¹⁹ Prestige, 'ΠΕΡΙΧΟΡΕΩ and ΠΕΡΙΧΟΡΕΣΙΣ in the Fathers': 250 and 251 respectively (emphasis added). Compare Cross, who thinks Damascene is perfectly serious about a real union between the two natures of Christ. See Cross, 'Christological Predication in John of Damascus': 71.

properties from one nature to another. The two natures remain intact, unconfused and unmingled, with the properties that properly belong to them. The interpenetration of Christ's human nature by his divine nature is possible because this involves the exercise of one of the essential attributes of the divine nature, namely omnipresence. If Christ's divine nature is essentially omnipresent, then it must exist everywhere at once (however that is construed), interpenetrating all things that exist, including the human nature of Christ.²⁰ So there is an interpenetration of the human nature of Christ by the divine nature, which does not require the transfer of properties between natures and is asymmetrical in virtue of the omnipresence of the divine nature.

We can now summarise our findings regarding nature-perichoresis:

- (1) The two natures of Christ subsist in a hypostatic union in the incarnation.
- (2) In this union there is a communication of properties between the divine nature and the human nature in the person of Christ.

Given that the strong version of the communication of attributes is fatally flawed on the basis of the foregoing argument, I shall assume the weaker view, which is:

- (3) The communication of attributes involves the attribution of the properties of both of the natures of Christ to the person of Christ, such that the *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 natures and without confusing or commingling the two natures of Christ or the generation of a *tertium quid*.

There is also a nature-perichoresis between the two natures of Christ, which is distinct from the communication of attributes:

- (4) The divine nature of Christ interpenetrates the human nature of Christ in virtue of divine omnipresence.
- (5) This interpenetration is asymmetrical: the relation of coinherence originates in the divine and moves in the direction of the human nature only. There is no sense in which the human nature penetrates the divine nature of Christ either in origination or reciprocation.

²⁰ This is true even if, with Thomas (and other traditional perfect being theologians), we deny that God is literally spatially located at every place. Thus Thomas: 'God is in all things by his power, inasmuch as all things are subject to His power; He is by His presence in all things, as all things are bare and open to His eyes; He is in all things by His essence, inasmuch as He is present to all as the cause of their being.' *ST* 1a. 8.3.

(6) Thus, in nature-perichoresis the two natures of Christ remain intact and unconfused. There is no transference of properties from one nature to the other. Nevertheless, there is a real interpenetration between the two natures of Christ.

This does raise a question: In what sense is the interpenetration of the human nature of Christ by the divine nature of Christ anything more than the interpenetration of my human nature by the divine nature of God at each moment of my continued existence? Earlier, I said that a difference of degree, rather than kind, was important in distinguishing between these two sorts of interpenetration. That is, there is some way in which the intimacy of the hypostatic union means the human nature of Christ is interpenetrated in a way that my human nature is not. Consider the following analogy, familiar in discussions of perichoresis. A sword could be said, in a loose and non-philosophical sense, to be 'interpenetrated' by the heat of the blacksmith's furnace as he forges the blade. Of course, the sword is not literally interpenetrated by the heat of the furnace, but even if the relation involved in this example is something much weaker than interpenetration, the central point remains the same. Presumably, if I were to place another sword in the furnace for a moment, it too would be 'interpenetrated' by the heat of the furnace and would become warm. But it would not be as hot as the first sword, which is being forged, and is a lot hotter than my own sword. The difference is one of quantity of heat, not quality of heat because both swords have been placed in the same furnace. But it is an important difference. One sword is red-hot, the other is merely warm. One sword will burn me if I touch it, the other will not, and so on.

Similarly, Christ's human nature may be interpenetrated in such a way in the hypostatic union that the difference between it and my nature on the question of interpenetration by the divine nature, whilst only a difference of degree, is, nevertheless, a significant degree of difference. For instance, Christ's consciousness of the interpenetrative presence of God would appear to have been significantly greater than most human beings. I am not consciously aware of God upholding and interpenetrating every fibre of my being at each moment of my existence. Nevertheless, he does so. But presumably, Christ was very much aware of this interpenetration of his human nature, e.g. 'I and the Father are One' (John 10:30). More significantly, the interpenetration of my human nature by God does not enable me to perform miracles like walking on water, passing through walls or rising from the dead.

But, I take it that on a classical Christology, this is exactly what the divine nature of Christ enables his human nature to do, via nature-perichoresis. It could be argued that it is the Holy Spirit that enables the human nature of Christ to perform miracles, rather than Christ's divine nature, if, say, the divine nature of Christ is not thought to act in and through the human nature of Christ in this way during the incarnation. But I take it that this is not a conventional view of the means by which Christ was able to perform miracles. A conventional view would claim that Christ was able to perform miracles in virtue of the action of his divine nature in and through his human nature in the hypostatic union.

But does this activity of the divine nature in and through the human nature of Christ mean that *only* Christ could be acted upon in this way via nature-perichoresis? Is it not possible that God could enable me to walk on water, or rise from the dead, through some increase of divine perichoretic activity in my own body? And if so, how is the nature-perichoresis experienced by Christ really different from the perichoresis I experience? The answer is that God *could* act upon others in the way in which he acts upon Christ. All that distinguishes the perichoretic relation Christ's human nature experiences with his divine nature, and my human nature experiences with God, is the degree to which the divine nature of Christ interpenetrates his human nature. But none of this means that there is not a difference between the way in which Christ's human nature is interpenetrated by the divine nature and the way in which I am interpenetrated by God.

Does this mean the hypostatic union is redundant because God could have brought about person-perichoresis by interpenetrating a human nature as he interpenetrates my human nature, without the need for a hypostatic union of two natures? Not necessarily. A number of classical theologians, following Anselm, say that the incarnation *requires* there to be a divine and human nature in hypostatic union in the person of Christ.²¹ If God simply created a being comprising a single human nature, and act upon that human being in a special way, via a non-hypostatic nature-perichoresis, this would not be sufficient for the purpose of the incarnation. Such a person would not be both fully God and fully man. He would be fully man, but also only merely man, with only a human nature upon which God acts in a special way. This is the heresy of adoptionism, that Jesus was a human being who

²¹ This, of course, is one of the central arguments in favour of the incarnation, offered by Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo*.

was ‘adopted’ or ‘possessed’ by the second person of the Trinity at some point in his life, becoming the Christ through this experience.²²

So, it seems to me that, although this version of nature-perichoresis does entail that the interpenetration of the human nature of Christ by his divine nature is only different in degree of divine co-inherence from that which is involved in God interpenetrating and upholding me at each moment of my existence, this nevertheless has important ramifications in the doctrine of the incarnation that do involve important differences between Christ and other human beings. And this need not lead away from orthodoxy. It also has the benefit of making sense of the communication of attributes and nature-perichoresis, and clearly distinguishes one from the other.²³

3. Person-perichoresis

What then, of person-perichoresis? This, we shall see, presents quite different problems from nature-perichoresis.

In the recent theological literature, person-perichoresis has been used in an extravagant fashion, by theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, as a conceptual tool by which to make sense of social theories of the Trinity. For instance, Karen Kilby notes (somewhat ironically) that,

It is the divine perichoresis which makes the three one [in social theories of the Trinity], and it is perichoresis which makes the Trinity a wonderful doctrine. There is among the three divine persons, it is said, a kind of mutual interpenetration which is not to be found amongst human persons, and it is because of this perfect interpenetration that the three persons are one God.²⁴

²² There are other grounds upon which Christ’s humanity is distinct from mine. His humanity is, according to classical theology, impeccable or at least, sinless; mine is peccable and sinful. His human nature is in hypostatic union with the divine nature; I am not. And so on.

²³ A possible consequence of this is that the Word could have assumed a human nature other than the one he did, in fact, assume. This will only work if human nature is a concrete particular of some kind, not just a property the Word assumes at the incarnation. Assume, for a moment, that human nature is a concrete particular. Then, the Word could have assumed my human nature rather than the human nature he did assume. But if he had done so, I would not exist because it is not a human person that the Word assumes, only a human nature. Had he assumed me, we would not have had an incarnation, but a case of divine possession, which is Nestorianism.

²⁴ Karen Kilby, ‘Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity’ in *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000): 435.

The use of person-perichoresis by theologians sympathetic to social theories of the Trinity (roughly, theories that emphasise the threeness, rather than the oneness of the Trinity, focussing on three divine individuals held together by a single divine essence, in which they participate perichoretically), does not mean that social Trinity theorists have a monopoly on this version of perichoresis. It could be that a theologian defending an Augustinian account of the Trinity, whereby the persons of the Trinity are differentiated by relational properties alone, has as much reason to endorse a version of person-perichoresis. This is precisely what I shall do. In this section of the article I shall assume an Augustinian doctrine of the Trinity as the model which informs my discussion of person-perichoresis.

To begin with, let us distinguish between properties in the Trinity belonging to individual persons of the Trinity, and properties that are shared between two or more persons of the Trinity.²⁵ Properties that are peculiar to one and only one person of the Trinity are called *Proprietates* in scholastic theology. There are person-forming relations, Fatherhood, Sonship and (passive) Spiration. There are also properties like 'origin-lessness' which is said to belong to the Father alone as the 'source' of the Trinity. In addition to these distinguishing properties that belong to only one divine person, there are properties that are held by only two persons of the Trinity, such as the active spiration of the Spirit by the Father and the Son, or, perhaps, the decree of the covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son. Anselm, standing foursquare in the Augustinian tradition of reflection upon the nature of the Trinity, makes an additional claim about the properties in the Trinity, to the effect that these properties can only be relational, and that there is only a real distinction in the Trinity where there is an opposition of the relations between two or more persons in the Trinity. This, according to Roman Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott, is called the basic trinitarian law: *In God all is one where there is no opposition of relations.*²⁶

We may now apply this to the doctrine of perichoresis. Ott explains that the Council of Florence in AD 1441 declared:

²⁵ This discussion of the distinguishing attributes of different persons of the Trinity draws upon Ludwig Ott's account in *The Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*: 70.

²⁶ The Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma: 70. Compare Anselm, *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*, §2 in *Anselm of Canterbury, The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and Gillian Evans (Oxford: University Press, 1998).

Because of this unity the Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Ghost, The Son is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son.²⁷

The problem is how to make sense of this declaration in a way that does not end up occluding or overriding those divine attributes that pertain to only one person, or only two persons, of the Trinity. For this reason, the following sort of notion of person-perichoresis is clearly inadequate:

The persons of the Trinity interpenetrate one another such that all the properties of each person of the Trinity are shared together in the essence of the Godhead.

Let us call this the *Strong Person-perichoresis Thesis*, or SPT. The SPT is compatible with the declaration of the Council of Florence, but it is false, for several reasons.

First, it cannot be the case that each of the persons of the Trinity share all the same properties because, as we have already seen, there are at least two sorts of properties which are not held in common in the Godhead. These are properties that are possessed by one and only one of the persons of the Trinity. For instance the property, ‘possessing underived being’, is a property of the Father alone. It is metaphysically impossible that either of the other two persons of the Trinity possess this property. Then there are properties that belong to only two persons of the Trinity, such as ‘actively spirating the Holy Spirit’. Such properties, like those relational properties that are shared between the three persons of the Godhead (e. g. ‘being one of the persons of the divine Trinity’), are necessarily true of God. That is, there is no possible world in which God does not possess these properties.²⁸ This means that there are properties which are necessary to the Godhead, but which are not shared by all the persons of the Godhead, in which case, SPT folds.

Secondly, the SPT is false because it entails a contradiction: God cannot be both triune *and* subsist in three persons who share *all the same* properties as each other. The reason being that this falls foul of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles. To re-cap, this is the notion that a thing is identical to another thing just in case that thing

²⁷ Ott, *The Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*: 71.

²⁸ Hence, they are neither ‘hard’ nor ‘soft’ properties in the sense that Swinburne uses in *The Christian God*: 35. Whether God has these necessary properties timelessly or temporally, is irrelevant to the current discussion.

has all the same properties as the first thing. So, Tweedledum 1 is identical to Tweedledum 2 just in case Tweedledum 1 has all the same properties as Tweedledum 2. And if Tweedledum 1 is identical with Tweedledum 2 at any one time, then he is identical with Tweedledum 2 at all times, since, by virtue of the necessity of identity, if a thing is identical with another thing at one time, it must be identical with that thing at every other time at which it exists. For a thing must be identical with itself at all times. So, if the SPT obtains, then God cannot be triune and subsist in three persons, because, on SPT, there are no properties that might individuate the persons of the Trinity. For there are no properties which one, and only one, person of the Trinity possesses on SPT. This, in turn, means there can be no distinct, divine persons to speak of. For distinct persons require distinct properties in order to individuate them. But there can be no such properties given SPT. So there can be no distinct divine persons on SPT. And if there are no persons, there is no Trinity. Hence, the SPT leads to the denial of the Trinity.

But it might be thought that the persons of the Godhead could be individuated in virtue of haecceity, or 'thisness', rather than in virtue of any properties that they possess.²⁹ And if this is true, then even if two individuals share all the same properties, they could still be different individuals, distinguished by the fact that they are 'this' individual, rather than 'that' individual. But, it could be argued that it is not the case that the divine persons are individuated solely on the basis of thisness, because God has properties that are metaphysically necessary and which are peculiar to only one person of the Trinity. In which case, for the second person of the Trinity to be instantiated, that person must have certain properties like 'being the Son'. Since it is metaphysically necessary that the second person of the Trinity have this property, and since it is impossible for the second person of the Trinity to fail to exist, the second person of the Trinity must have this property, and this property, and others, serve to individuate the second person from the other persons of the Trinity. So, thisness is not an option for individuating the persons of the Trinity. Swinburne takes a

²⁹ Haecceity is, roughly, the property a particular thing has in virtue of being 'that thing' rather than some other thing. This entails that a particular object has thisness just in case it is self-identical, e.g. Jones is self-identical with Jones = Jones is 'this' ('Jonesian') thing. See E. J. Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford: University Press, 2003): 102.

similar view at one point in his discussion of the divine nature. He claims that a divine nature lacks thisness because, ‘there is nothing more to a divine individual than the instantiation of the divine essence and any further individuating relational properties (e.g. ‘being begotten).’³⁰

So, some alternative to SPT has to be found which takes into account the fact that the relation involved in person-perichoresis applies equally to each of the divine persons, and makes sense of those properties that are not shared in the divine life of the Godhead. Unlike nature-perichoresis, where the relation involved is asymmetrical and involves the interpenetration of the human nature by the divine nature in virtue of omnipresence, the unity of the Godhead demands that the perichoretic relation involved expresses an even more intimate relationship than this. So a more robust notion of perichoresis has to be found that can meet this requirement for the co-inherence of the persons of the Trinity. For instance:

The persons of the Trinity share all their properties in a common divine essence apart from those properties that serve to individuate one of the persons of the Trinity, or express a relation between only two persons of the Trinity.

This may be called the *Weak Person-perichoresis Thesis*, or WPT. On this version of person-perichoresis the interpenetration of each of the persons of the Trinity by the others is limited, rather than complete. But this, it seems to me, is a requirement for a doctrine of person-perichoresis that makes sense, otherwise the individuation of the persons of the Trinity is jeopardised.

Is this WPT compatible with the decree of the Council of Florence? Recall that the Council’s formula was:

Because of this unity the Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Ghost, The Son is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son.

The answer is that our formulation of perichoresis is only compatible with the Council’s decree if the phrase ‘wholly in x’ is understood to mean something like, ‘wholly in x, yet exclusive of individuating properties and properties shared between only two persons of the Trinity’. This is rather an awkward way of reading the decree. But something like this is required in order to preserve the requirement of relational properties that individuate the persons of the Trinity.

³⁰ Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: University Press, 1994): 189.

4. Conclusions

To sum up: although some of the Fathers were not entirely clear about the matter, we need to distinguish between the communication of attributes and nature-perichoresis. In the former, contrary to the Lutheran view of the matter, there is no transfer of properties from one nature to the other. The communication of attributes is merely a device by which we may refer to both natures of Christ via the person of Christ in phrases like, Christ's declaration, 'before Abraham was born, I am.' Nature-perichoresis is something more than this. But here too caution must be exercised. There is only the interpenetration of the human by the divine nature, and only in virtue of the omnipresence of the divine nature. This is similar in kind, but not in degree, to the way in which God interpenetrates all created things. Person-perichoresis is different from nature-perichoresis in this regard. In person-perichoresis, the divine persons share most, but not all divine properties together in the divine essence. Thus, person-perichoresis must be robust enough to express this strong sense of interpenetration required for the Trinity to make sense. But it must also be fine-grained enough to ensure that it does not obscure or deny the fact that there are properties that individuate the persons of the Trinity that are not shared together in this perichoresis.

None of this actually *explains* what perichoresis is: what does it mean for the human nature of Christ to be interpenetrated by the omnipresence of the divine nature of Christ to a greater degree than the way in which the divine nature interpenetrates me? And what does it mean to say that the three persons of the Trinity interpenetrate one another in their shared life together, whilst remaining, at-one-and-the-same-time one God in three distinct persons? I cannot say because I do not know. This is a divine mystery before which theology must give way to doxology.³¹

³¹ I am grateful to the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research for the invitation to give this as the Tyndale Lecture in Philosophy of Religion for 2004, and to the participants in the Tyndale Philosophy of Religion Study Group of 2004 for several helpful suggestions that improved the overall argument of the paper.