



A
Celtic
Christology

*The Incarnation according to
John Scottus Eriugena*

John F. Gavin

Foreword by
John Panteleimon Manoussakis

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*The Incarnation according to
John Scottus Eriugena*

John F. Gavin, S.J.

with a foreword by

John Panteleimon Manoussakis



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*To my brothers and sisters:
Ellen, Tom, Tim, Dan, Brendan, Mary, and Patrick.
For their love and support on the journey.*

And to my Jesuit brothers. AMDG.

“In my Father’s house there are many rooms; if it were not so,
would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?
And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again
and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

JOHN 14:2–3

*Quae mens, quae virtus, superum quae facta sophia
in carnem poterit descensum dicere verbi,
carnis et in verbum sublimia bimata nosse?*

—IOHANNES SCOTTUS ERIUGENA, *CARMINA* XXV

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Foreword

JOHN SCOTTUS ERIUGENA LIVED IN a world that was still characterized by the desire to dwell in mysteries, not by the aptitude for solving perplexities. His theological style will disappoint anyone looking to be impressed by the grandeur of the struggle, of the continuous effort, to uphold and reconcile incompatible systems of thought. The intelligibility of being is yet to be fragmented and thought is still preserved and presented in a unified vision. What one meets in Eriugena's work is the confidence in God's self-revelation through complementing the manifestations of his creation and his Incarnation—a revelation not awaiting to be discovered, but to be *seen* and to be *lived*. The calmness of his work reflects this confidence that finds its correspondence in a vision that remains integrated and whole.

Themes that for some time now have been treated as distinct topics—Christology, anthropology, metaphysics, eschatology, and so on—are difficult, if not impossible, to be separated from each other in Eriugena's thought. And it would be a mistake to single out any of these, treating them in isolation from the whole to which they belong. These aspects of Eriugena's theological system are like musical themes, leitmotifs even. Yet, unlike our contemporary understanding of music, Eriugena's compositions are not like the sonatas or the symphonies of the Classical and Romantic eras, for which the musical theme is a singular and unique moment, a musical phrase or idea that can stand on its own as an event and as the eventful, connected by other isolated themes only through the familial resemblances of harmonic modulation. Rather, Eriugena's theology is more like the linear complexity of Johann Sebastian Bach's chorales. The theme, if one could still speak of a theme, permeates the whole and it reverberates and echoes throughout the entire composition. Like Johann Sebastian

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Bach, who brought together in his music the distinct styles of North and South Europe, so Eriugena combines the Augustinian West with the Dionysian East—a valuable example and resource for our ecumenical efforts.

To put it differently, our reading of Eriugena, as with many of his contemporaries, has been subjected to the distortion of knowledge's progressive fragmentation that can be traced, if only in quick outline, by looking at the ways that each period aspired to present its self-understanding to itself, while passing it down to future generations: for the Medievals this presentation took the form of the *summa*; for the Moderns it was the *encyclopedia*; one could say that today we have moved beyond modernity to a new period marked by the advent of *Wikipedia*. On the one hand, for the *summae* knowledge was understood in its all-encompassing nature, where each article presupposes the previous one and anticipates the following in an interlocking fashion that is, at once, systematic and synthetic, so that it merits the often-invoked comparison to the architecture of the Gothic cathedrals. The encyclopedias of the Enlightenment, on the other hand, are organized by the arbitrariness of the alphabet, so that one entry follows the next without so much of a presumption to any connection or logical necessity other than the accidental fact of sharing the same initial letter. The encyclopedic arrangement is only symptomatic of the arbitrariness and accidental character that had infected knowledge itself well before its codification in dictionaries and encyclopedias. On the way from the *summa* to the encyclopedia, the whole was lost.

How are we to recapture it? The greatest strength of Fr. Gavin's book lies precisely in this: in representing an effort to restore the continuity of experience in Eriugena's thought. The proto-scholastic arrangement of the *Periphyseon* is read in light of his liturgical hymnology, while Eriugena the philosopher is not separated from Eriugena the homilist and commentator. Fr. Gavin seeks—and in the humble opinion of this reader succeeds—in rehabilitating Eriugena's theology within its ecclesial, liturgical, and sacramental context—a context that, as he shows, makes little sense in the absence of a robust Christology.¹ For too long and for too many scholars, Eriugena has been read as little more than a Christianized Neoplatonist.

The accusation is, of course, quite familiar. It was brought with the same force against Eriugena's Eastern mentor, Dionysius the pseudo-Aeropagite;

1. The author's criticism of the Irishman's failure to incorporate successfully the Maximian theology of the two wills might be indicative of an incomplete appropriation on Eriugena's part of Chalcedonian Christology.

but it has today collapsed, thanks to the efforts of more recent and more attentive readings of his corpus.² The present work aspires to render the same service to Dionysius' student. This is not to deny, of course, the all-too-evident influence of Neoplatonism (as it should be expected, since what other philosophical language did the Christian thinkers of the time have at their disposal that could become a suitable instrument, an *organon*, for constructing their theologies?), which becomes for his poetic mind, as poetic as any Irishman's, the inspiration for some daring conclusions that would justly sound strange to orthodox ears. Yet, at the end of the day, Eriugena's allegiances are unambiguous for, in Fr. Gavin's reading, he emerges not as a Christianized Neoplatonist, but merely as a Neoplatonic Christian. One may think that the difference here is only one of emphasis; nevertheless, it is an emphasis that makes all the difference.

The most decisive aspect of the reversal between these two epithets is the centrality that the concept of creation occupies in Eriugena's work. Indeed, his fourfold division is organized around the sole criterion of creation; that is, the whole is divided into a) that which creates but is not created; b) that which creates and is created; c) that which is created but does not create; and d) that which neither creates nor is created. What distinguishes, therefore, the four realms of being is, what we may call after Heidegger, not an ontological difference, but rather a *ktisiological* difference—that is, the difference between created and uncreated orders.

Here a word of clarification of the terminology is in order. As the foregoing remarks should have made immediately clear, and in spite of Eriugena's own employment of the term *natura*, and against the very title of his magnum opus (*Peri-physeon*), what determines his thought, and what ultimately separates him from a Porphyry or even an Eckhart, is not *natura*, but *creatura*—the passing from *physis* to *ktisis*.

The difference between these two terms that have come to be used today largely as synonyms is a telling one. As any student of ancient philosophy would know, nature is simply what keeps flowing out of a primordial source. Nature is also that primordial source itself that remains "hidden."³ In this conception, nature stands in opposition to creation—see, for example, the binary polarity between φύσει and τέχνη that organizes

2. For a summary of the conflicting interpretations of Dionysius and a new approach see Perl, *Theophany*, 2.

3. On Heraclitus' famous fragment φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ (Diels-Kranz, fr. 123) see Pierre Hadot's magisterial analysis in *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*.

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Aristotelian metaphysics—for nature is itself its own origin, or rather the lack of an origin (*Abgrund*). Several classical ideas find their birthplace in this image of the aboriginal flowing of nature (*physis*): nature’s anarchy and thus eternity; nature’s emanation; nature’s divinity.⁴ In all these concepts the prevailing thought is that of nature’s *necessity*. For classical thought, *physis* exists *necessarily*. Its necessary character scorns man’s contingency.

On the other hand, the scriptural idea of creation underscores the world’s *contingency*, for there was a time that the world did not exist, nor had to exist. Furthermore, the creation of the world “in the beginning” (Gen 1:1) dispels any illusions of eternity and allows for the mystery of time and history to be positively evaluated. And because, unlike nature, creation is neither eternal nor divine, it can now be known (hence the inception of modern science). Above all, however, the concept of creation encompasses humanity and the world together and not in some opposition. Thus the metaphysics of the *ktisiological* difference has some decisive anthropological implications.

In the Christian tradition, the world is always thought not apart from humanity, but together with it, as man is never thought apart from the world. So, for St. Maximus the Confessor, for example, man cannot be saved apart from the world; that is, the world is the ladder that man needs to employ in order to reach his salvation, a ladder that, unlike Wittgenstein’s, he never kicks off once he has reached his destination—especially since this same ladder was assumed by God in his Incarnation in order to reach man.⁵ So the world, we could say, cannot be “saved” apart from man. Indeed, for the church fathers—and Eriugena follows in this line of tradition—the purpose of the world was man and this is why man is the *macrocosm* of the cosmos. Today we think precisely on opposite terms, so much so that it is difficult for us to understand how it is possible for man to be “larger,” so to speak, than the universe. For us today the universe is larger than man (it is interesting here to take note of modernity’s tendency to think of the world in spatial categories) and therefore, if an analogy is to be established

4. Aristotle preserves in his *De Anima* the apophthegmatic articulation of nature’s divinity in a dictum attributed to Thales: πάντα πλήρη θεῶν εἶναι (A, 5, 411a7).

5. For the far-reaching (one could say without exaggeration “cosmic”) implications of the Incarnation in Eriugena’s work, see the second chapter of this book. Yet, it is precisely for these reasons that expressions from the first chapter of this book, such as “the inauthenticity of material expression” or “the inauthenticity of carnal expression,” if left unqualified, make me feel rather uneasy (not to mention that the author’s insights into what he calls an “environmental Christology” would otherwise be lost).

between the two, then we can understand man only as the *microcosm* of the universe. But if for a moment we stop thinking in spatial terms, then man encompasses the whole world, for man, in contemplating the world, not only recognizes its order (therefore its cosmic and “cosmetic” beauty) but also provides, or rather bestows in his priestly function, this order upon the world. This idea, traced through Gregory of Nyssa (in his *De opificio hominis*) to Dionysius the Aeropagite, to Maximus the Confessor, is finally received by Eriugena who boldly affirms that:

In man every creature, both visible and invisible, is created. Therefore, he is said to be the “workshop of all things,” since in him all things which come after God are contained. Thus he is customarily called an intermediary. Indeed, since he consists of body and soul, he contains within himself and gathers into unity the extremes that are at a distance from himself—that is, the spiritual and material.⁶

Since creation in general (that is, both the world and humanity) was not necessary, nor determined by any hidden necessity for God, but came about as an act of his freedom, the world and humanity are also participants in that gift. That means that creation, and man along with it, are free to become themselves. “The manner in which *what* something is (given/gift, being/eternal-being) emerges from *how* something is (well-being/non-being).”⁷ What we have here is a revolutionary idea that breaks with the essentialism of classical philosophy, and particularly of Neoplatonism, and anticipates by some ten centuries existentialism’s primacy to existence (the *how*) over essence (the *what*). It can indeed be expected as a matter of course that wherever the *ex nihilo* of creation is not properly thematized, then an essentialist metaphysics is in order. Eriugena, in situating his thought vis-à-vis creation, thinks consistently of the origin, of the beginning, that is of the *nothing*—to which, ironically, a theologian is not supposed to have recourse.⁸ Yet, Eriugena’s thought is made possible by a constant encounter with this very question: “why there is something rather than nothing?”

6. *Peri*. V, 49, 1517–23, the author’s translation. Fr. Gavin dedicates a good part of this book’s first chapter precisely to the topic of “Man’s role in God’s creation” implied here.

7. P. 93 below (emphasis in the original), and again later on: “[w]hile all return to God, this union does not stifle the distinct forms of participation: *who* one is and *how* one is as an individual shapes one’s final state of participation in the divine.” (p. 137, emphasis in the original).

8. At least according to Heidegger, who, in his polemical remarks against Christianity, assumes that a Christian, on account of his or her belief in a creator God, is unable to think the primordial nothing. Thus a “Christian philosophy is foolishness and a squared

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The primacy of existence and existents—be they he who exists superabundantly as the principle of existence or those who exist (literally, *ek-sist*) as derivative beings—avoids and indeed transforms the anonymity of being (what Levinas has called the *il y a*). Existence is made personal. This has an epistemological consequence: essence (the *what, quid est*, quiddity) can be known only through an existent (the *tropos* of hypostatic being). Here the ground is prepared for the famous Kierkegaardian principle of the Incarnation that reverses the classical hierarchy of ranking the universal higher than the particular and affords to the particular an infinite value—indeed the value of infinity. For the author of this work, this consequence has concrete ethical and theological ramifications, which the reader will undoubtedly find both enlightening and beneficial to discover in the pages that follow.

John Panteleimon Manoussakis
The Feast of St. Andrew, 2013

circle” (*Introduction to Metaphysics*).

Acknowledgements

DURING MY ORAL LICENSE EXAMINATION at the Augustinianum in Rome in 2004, I rashly stated that Eriugena's Christology was excessively platonic and lacked a sense of historicity. Prof. Giulio d'Onofrio rightfully challenged my words, encouraging me to examine the sources more broadly. His well-founded critique and guidance over the years have inspired me in writing this volume.

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A Note on Translations and Editions

Unless otherwise stated in the footnote, all translations are my own. This includes the *Carmina*. Though Michael Herren provides a superb translation in his edition, I have elected to prepare my renderings for the illustration of key points.

All citations from the *Periphyseon* are from CCM 161–65.

Abbreviations

Works of Johannes Scottus Eriugena

<i>Carm.</i>	<i>Carmina</i>
<i>Comm.</i>	<i>Commentarius in Sanctum Evangelium secundum Johannem</i>
<i>Expo.</i>	<i>Expositiones in Ierarchiam Coelestem</i>
<i>Hom.</i>	<i>Homilia in prologum Sancti Evangelii secundum Johannem</i>
<i>Peri.</i>	<i>Periphyseon (On the Division of Nature)</i>
<i>Prae.</i>	<i>De divina praedestinatione liber</i>

Series

CCG	<i>Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca</i> . Turnhout: Brepols.
CCL	<i>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</i> . Turnhout: Brepols.
CCM	<i>Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Medievalis</i> . Turnhout: Brepols.
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> . Vienna: Universität Salzburg.
GNO	<i>Gregorii Nysseni Opera</i> . Leiden: Brill.
LCL	<i>Loeb Classical Library</i> . Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i> . Edited by J. P. Migne. Paris, 1857–66.