CHAPTER 5

John Scottus Eriugena

INTRODUCTION: THE CAROLINGIAN RENAISSANCE

John Scot(t)us Eriugena was an Irish scholar residing at the court of Charles the Bald, grandson of Charlemagne, king of the Franks. Charlemagne stood at the beginning of a cultural renaissance (*renovatio*), a blossoming of the arts and the intellectual life. Eriugena is mainly remembered for his voluminous work the *Periphyseon* [On Nature] or, in its Latin title, *De Divisione Naturae* [The Division of Nature], a dialogue between a Master (*Nutritor*) and his disciple (*Alumnus*). Other important works are his *De Divina Praedestinatione* [Treatise on Divine Predestination], the *Homily on the Prologue of John*, and an incomplete *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (and part of which is lost: all we have is the commentary on John 1:11–29; 3:1–4, 28; 6:5–14).

We do not know when Eriugena was born – he seems to have died some time around AD 870 or not too many years afterwards. He arrived at the court of Charles the Bald in the 840s. He knew Greek, and translated the complete works of Pseudo-Dionysius, the *Ambigua* and *Quaestiones ad Thallassicum* by Maximus Confessor, and Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio* [On the Making of Man]. These authors had a major impact on Eriugena's own thought, and he quotes extensively from their works in his own *Periphyseon*. Some of the main themes he adopts from Pseudo-Dionysius are the emphasis on the unknowable nature of God, the roles of negative and positive theology and the themes of procession and return.

After the turbulences of previous centuries (discussed earlier) Charlemagne (AD 742–814), sometimes called *Pater Europae* (the Father of Europe) was crowned Emperor by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day AD 800. This event had more than a symbolic significance: it illustrates how the papacy turned its attention away from Byzantium towards the West – thereby reinforcing the political and cultural separation between the Latin West and the Greek East. For the first time after the collapse of the Roman

Empire, Western Europe was united under one head: from Frisia and Saxony in the North to the Pyrenees and Northern Italy (with the exception of the papal regions) in the South, and Bohemia and Dalmatia in the East. Charlemagne had three sons and initially divided his realm into three parts; but in AD 813 he crowned his only surviving son, Louis the Pious, Emperor in the magnificent Palatine Chapel at Aachen. After the death of Charlemagne, Pope Stephanus did the ceremony over in Reims, thereby creating an important historical precedent: emperors are crowned by Popes, preferably in Rome. Charlemagne himself moved around (*Vagobundus Carolus*) throughout his empire, thus failing to establish one major center of power and administration, which partly explains the later fragmentation of the Carolingian empire. Under his son Louis the Pious, monasteries were reorganized and the Benedictine Rule was enforced throughout the empire.

After Louis' death and a series of dynastic disputes the empire was divided amongst Charlemagne's grandsons into three parts in AD 843 (Treaty of Verdun): the Western part (later France) was given to Charles the Bald at whose court Eriugena Scottus would reside; the Eastern part (later Germany) was given to Louis the German, while the Middle Kingdom (including the Low Countries, Burgundy and Italy) was given to Lothair; this Middle Kingdom did not prove politically viable.

Partly due to the lack of a proper political center, family rivalry and external pressure (from Muslims in the South, Magyars in the East and Vikings who presented a constant threat throughout the ninth century in the North Sea regions), the Carolingian empire proved politically unsuccessful; however, as suggested earlier, a genuine cultural rebirth (renaissance) took place under the Carolingians which was to have a lasting legacy in many areas. Charlemagne tried to create a culture for his new Christian empire, attracting scholars from all over Europe (Lombards, Visigoths, Anglo-Saxons, Franks and Irish), promoting the arts, the foundation of schools, the copying of Scripture, the study of classic literature and the Fathers and so forth. Because Charlemagne wished to have a reliable text of the Latin Bible (Jerome's Vulgate), study of Latin and its most important authors was cultivated. Study of the seven liberal arts (*grammatica, rhetorica, dialectica, arithmetica, geometria, astronomia, musica*) was encouraged in cathedral schools. It was Martianus Capella (fourth century) who, in his *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* [The Marriage of Philology and Mercury], had bequeathed the tradition of the seven liberal arts to the Middle Ages. Eriugena knew this work and wrote a commentary on it.

Like his grandfather, Charles the Bald (AD 822–877) ruled from a peripatetic court, which mainly travelled across the Isle-de-France region.

However, a prominent place of learning was in the Laon region and it is here that Eriugena wrote and taught according to the testimony of the local Bishop Pardulus.[1] Eriugena seems to have enjoyed the personal protection of the King, which was to prove significant in light of the opposition the theological views of the Irishman elicited at the time.

THEOLOGICAL DEBATES IN THE NINTH CENTURY

Lively theological debates, in which Charles the Bald took a personal interest, illustrate the newly found intellectual confidence and sophistication. Important topics that were discussed in the ninth century include iconoclasm (the Byzantine emperor Leo III issued an edict forbidding images, evoking opposition from iconophiles), the *Filioque* question, the nature of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and predestination.[2]

The Eucharistic controversy was ignited by Paschasius Radbertus, abbot of Corbie (d. 860) who wrote *De Corpore et Sanguine Christi* [The Body and Blood of Christ], one of the first medieval treatises on the Eucharist. In it, he argued that, after the consecration, the bread and wine are identical with the historical flesh and blood of Christ, as it was "born of Mary, suffered on the cross, and rose again from the tomb."[3] Thus, although the historical body and blood appear as bread and wine in the Eucharist, for Radbertus the relation between the Eucharistic body and the historical body was one of identity.[4] Paschasius Radbertus (like his opponent Ratramnus) struggled to properly address the issue: How can something be a reality if it is only image of a reality?[5] For Radbertus, the bread and wine, perceived by the senses, are *figura*, while the Eucharistic Body of Christ, perceived with the eyes of faith, is the truth (*veritas*). This Eucharistic body is identical to the body of the historical Jesus. Radbertus therefore argues for the real presence of Christ by adopting an extreme, almost physicalist view of the Eucharist. Because of the adoption of this physicalist view, he has to introduce the distinction between *veritas* (the reality of the Body and Blood, identical with that of the

[1] See John O'Meara, *Eriugena* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 14.

[2] For an overview of some of these issues and the intellectual context from which they arose I have benefited from Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena. A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 7–26.

[3] Paschasius Radbertus, *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini*, I.2 *CCCM* 15. For a partial English translation, see George E. McCracken, *Early Medieval Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 94–108.

[4] See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. III: *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)* (Chicago University Press, 1978), 75.

[5] See Edward Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 83.

historical Jesus), and *figura* (the outward appearance of bread and wine, which does not look anything like Body and Blood).[6]

His opponent Ratramnus used some of the key terms in a rather different manner. For him, *veritas* refers to what is perceptible to the senses (which comes close to what Radbertus meant by *figura*). Thus, for Ratramnus, truth or reality refers to the empirical reality. By figure he means "a kind of overshadowing that reveals its intent under some sort of veil."[7] Ratramnus denies the identification of the historical and Eucharistic body: "Nothing is more absurd than to take bread as flesh and to say that wine is blood."[8] There is only a "resemblance" between the two. The Eucharistic bread and wine are called the body and blood in a manner similar to the way we still call any annual Easter the day of resurrection (although there was only one day of resurrection, centuries ago).[9]

While Ratramnus is often credited with a more symbolic understanding of the Eucharist the presuppositions that govern his account are actually more positivistic than those of Radbertus. For Ratramnus, what is real is, in the first instance, that which is obvious and factual.[10] Both Paschasius and Ratramnus struggle to make sense of the relation between reality and symbolism. Pashasius, concerned to emphasize the real presence of Christ, stressed the identity of the body of the historical Jesus and the Eucharistic body. His is a radical physicalist-realist position. Ratramnus, on the other hand, adopts an almost empiricist understanding of reality, and therefore he cannot make this identification: the bread and wine simply do not look like flesh and blood. Hence, he argues that the bread and wine veil the Body and Blood. Neither Paschasius Radbertus nor Ratramnus see the corporeal as something which *reveals* the spiritual. Both Paschasius' physicalist position as well as Ratramnus' notion that the corporeal veils the spiritual, are in marked contrast to the truly symbolic outlook of Eriugena Scotus.

Because the Mass was increasingly seen as a sacrifice, Radbertus' position, which emphasized the identity of the historical and the Eucharistic, was

[6] Paschasius Radbertus, *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* IV: "If we truthfully examine the matter, it is rightly called both the truth (*ueritas*) and a figure (*figura*), so that it is a figure or character of truth because it is outwardly sensed. Truth, however, is anything rightly understood or believed inwardly concerning this mystery." McCracken, *Early Medieval Theology*, 102.

[7] Ratramnus, *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* § 7; McCracken, *Early Medieval Theology*, 119.

[8] Ratramnus, *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* § 11; McCracken, *Early Medieval Theology*, 121.

[9] Ratramnus, *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* § 37: "And although the Lord's body, in which he once suffered is one thing, and the blood, which was shed for the salvation of the world, is one thing, yet the sacraments of these two things have assumed their names, being called Christ's body and blood, since they are so called on account of a resemblance with the things they represent." McCracken, *Early Medieval Theology*, 128–29.

[10] Ratramnus, *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini*, § 8.

favored in the later tradition.[11] The controversy about the nature of the Eucharistic presence would resurface in the eleventh-century (not to mention during the Reformation): in a synod held in Vercelli in 1050, the views of Berengar of Tours, who appealed to the views of Ratramnus (although he erroneously attributed the work to Eriugena), were condemned. It is no coincidence that during the eleventh-century controversy the works of Ratramnus on the Eucharist were attributed to Eriugena. For in his *Commentary on John*, Eriugena argues that we offer up Christ in a spiritual manner, consuming the Eucharistic bread and wine with our mind and not with our teeth *(mente non dente comedimus)*.[12] Still, as an author who was deeply imbued with the legacy of Greek Neoplatonism, Eriugena has a much stronger sacramental understanding of the world than Ratramnus. All material things point to a truer, spiritual reality, and this applies equally, if not more, to the Eucharistic bread and wine.

Eriugena shows the influence of Greek thought on a number of issues. One of these is the *Filioque*. The *Filioque* issue refers to the belief, inspired by the work of Augustine (see Chapter 2), that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and from the Son* (in Latin: *Filioque*). The Spanish Church interpolated the *Filioque* in the Creed during the third Council of Toledo (AD 589), and from Spain this innovation made its way north to France and Germany. Rome would continue to recite the Creed without the *Filioque* until the beginning of the eleventh century. Eriugena is well aware that the *Filioque* is a later, Latin addition to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed from AD 381,[13] and in the *Periphyseon* we find the *Alumnus* (the student) saying that he is "not too preoccupied with this question" – as long as the co-equality of the Persons and the role of the Person of the Father as the sole source of the Trinity is safeguarded.[14] Drawing a comparison between the sun, its ray and the brightness which it causes, on the one hand, and the processions within the Trinity on the other, Eriugena in his role of *Nutritor* (the Teacher) had shown himself fairly sympathetic to the moderate Greek view, which allows for the notion that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *through* the Son. The brightness does not proceed from the sun and the ray as from two causes; rather it proceeds from the sun through the ray. Similarly, with moderate Greeks we can say that the Spirit (= the brightness) proceeds from the Father (= the sun) through the Son (= the ray) rather than from the Father and the Son, which is the Latin view.[15]

[11] For a short and useful summary, see Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology*, 74–80.

[12] *Commentary on John* I.xxxi.311B. [13] *Periphyseon* 601C; 612B.

[14] *Periphyseon* 612D. I use the translation by I. P. Sheldon, revised by John O'Meara (Washington: Dumburton Oaks, 1987).

[15] *Ibid.*, 609A–C.

It is certainly remarkable to encounter a Latin author in the ninth century who is so well versed in Greek language and theology. By the beginning of the sixth century few Westerners spoke Greek, and due to the impact of the barbarian invasions the Western half of the Roman Empire had drifted further and further away in political, cultural and linguistic terms from the Eastern half. The ninth century witnessed an unfortunate dispute between Pope Nicholas and Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople, with mutual excommunications (in AD 863 and 867). Relations were restored in AD 867 but they remained tense and would significantly worsen in 1054 (the Great Schism), reaching their low mark in AD 1204 (the taking of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade).

Perhaps the debate on predestination – another Augustinian legacy – also illustrates Eriugena's Greek theological sympathies. A monk called Gottschalk argued for a double predestination: good people are destined to salvation, the others to damnation. This resulted in a major debate: his opponents argued that God predestines only his elect. Hincmar, the bishop of Reims, called on Eriugena to settle the issue – but the outcome was rather different from what Hincmar had expected or desired. In AD 851 Eriugena wrote a relatively short work, *De Divina Praedestinatione* [Treatise on Divine Predestination] in which he argued that, in order to solve the difficulty, one had to have recourse to reason. Eriugena argued that we cannot properly speak of predestination in God: since God is simple and beyond time, foreknowledge and other temporal notions do not apply to him. Moreover, seeing that sin and evil are nothing but absence of goodness (the Neoplatonic notion of *privatio boni*), they cannot be caused by God. Human beings are free, and if they choose evil, this is due to their own free will, not to God. Thus salvation is open to all and God does not predestine anybody. Hincmar was not pleased: first, because Eriugena denied predestination altogether – or rather, he identified it with God's being, goodness and simplicity and therefore nothing is foreknown or predestined in the strict sense[16]; second, because he applied philosophical reasoning to a theological problem. As he puts it in another work: nobody enters heaven except by means of philosophy (*nemo intrat in coelum nisi per philosophiam*).[17]

[16] As Eriugena puts it in the Epilogue to the *Treatise on Divine Predestination*, 130: "the one eternal predestination of God is God, and exists only in those things that are, but has no bearing at all on those that are not."

[17] See *Annotationes in Marcianum* (ed. Cora E. Lutz, Cambridge, MA), 64, 23–24, quoted by E. Jeauneau, *Homélie*, 263, n. 1.

ERIUGENA'S VIEWS ON FAITH AND REASON

Eriugena evoked criticism for this strong emphasis upon reason. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see him as a champion of a kind of rationalism *avant la lettre*. Eriugena draws explicitly on Augustine's early work *On True Religion* (*De Vera Religione*), 5, 8, when stating that "true philosophy is true religion and conversely that true religion is true philosophy," or that the exercise of philosophy is nothing but "the exposition of the rules of true religion by which the supreme and principal cause of all things, God, is worshipped with humility and rationally searched for."[18]

For Eriugena there can be no doubt that "our salvation takes its beginning from faith."[19] In his *Homily on the Prologue to the Gospel of John*, Eriugena argues that Peter (who symbolizes faith and virtuous action) enters the tomb of Christ (interpreted here allegorically as the Holy Scriptures) first, while John (who symbolizes contemplation and knowledge) waits for him: "For if Peter symbolizes faith, then John signifies the intellect. Therefore, since it is written: 'Unless you believe you will not understand,' faith necessarily enters first into the tomb of Holy Scripture, followed by intellect, for which faith has prepared the entry."[20] Just as Peter preceded John, so faith must precede reason, which, nevertheless, has an important role to play in explaining its implications and hidden treasures. The main reason why it would be a gross misunderstanding to label Eriugena a rationalistic author or even a philosopher in the modern sense of the word, is the fact that for him reason merely assists us in instilling in us an ever more profound sense of the divine mystery and hiddenness.

Both philosophy and faith flow from the same source of divine Wisdom, and true faith and true reason do not conflict with one another.[21] Given his strong negative theological stance, reason does not abolish faith but deepens it – it makes it more profoundly aware of the incomprehensibility and otherness of God. For Eriugena this growing illumination or awareness of the divine otherness and darkness will come to full fruition in the afterlife only.[22] In our mortal state there are only the delights of an arduous and never-ending search for truth. This kind of search is held only among the wise "to whom nothing is more pleasing to the ear than true reason, nothing

[18] *Treatise on Divine Predestination* I.1, p. 7. [19] *Treatise on Divine Predestination* I.4, p. 9.
[20] *Homily* III.284D–285A; all translations by Bamford, *The Voice of the Eagle*, 23.
[21] *Periphyseon* 511B.
[22] Commenting in *Homily* xii, on "And the light shone in the darkness," Eriugena states: "The Light shines in the darkness of faithful souls and shines there more and more, beginning in faith and leading to knowledge" (*a fide choans, ad speciem tendens*), p. 39. This knowledge refers to the beatific vision.

more delightful to investigate when it is being sought after, nothing more beautiful to contemplate when it is found."[23] Undaunted by the seeming impossibility of the path, aided by the grace of God, the wise will return time and again to the contemplation of Truth, and reaching it they will love it, abide in it and find rest in it.[24]

In order to appreciate Eriugena's views on the relation between theology and philosophy we need to remember that the medieval view of intellectual understanding is much richer than the modern understanding of reason (*Vernunft, raison*). Medieval authors distinguish between reason (*ratio*) and intellect or understanding (*intellectus*). Commenting on Jesus' reply to the Samaritan woman (John 4:16: "Go and call your husband"), Eriugena not only illustrates that he is well versed in allegorical readings of the Scriptures by claiming that the Samaritan woman represents the rational aspect (*anima rationalis*) of the soul while the husband represents the mind or intellect (*animus, intellectus, mens*); more importantly he then goes on, having referred to 1 Cor. 11:3, to indicate a hierarchy within human understanding:

> the head of the rational soul (*anima rationalis*) is her husband, that is, her intellect (*intellectus*), and the head of the intellect is Christ. For the natural order of the human creature is as follows: the soul should be subject to the governance of the mind (*mens*), and the mind should be subject to Christ. In this way, the whole human being is united, through Christ, to God and the Father.[25]

Eriugena offers us a rich portrayal of human understanding and intellect, one that is much deeper than what reason can offer us and one which may challenge our modern positivistic (and therefore reductionist) mindset, which merely "sticks to the facts." For Eriugena, as for us, reason is a discursive faculty (*ratiocinatur*) geared towards this physical world.[26] But reason is only one facet of human understanding: there is also intellect (*intellectus*) which can, in this life, intuit more profound mysteries in the heights of contemplation, and it can pass on these insights, however opaquely, to reason.[27] The scholastics will develop these ideas in more detail, and we will return to them in due course.

[23] *Periphyseon* 512B, p. 109. [24] *Ibid.*, 744B, p. 383 [25] *Commentary on John* IV.v.336A, p. 305.
[26] *Periphyseon* 755B and 754D: when the soul is preoccupied with the divine it acts as mind (*mens*), spirit (*animus*), and intellect (*intellectus*); when it is occupied with this physical world and its causes, it is called discursive reason (*ratio*).
[27] *Commentary on John* IV.v.336B.

inexhaustible) he can argue that God, in manifesting himself in the world, can also begin to comprehend himself:

> the divine nature . . . allows itself to appear in its theophanies, willing to emerge from the most hidden recesses of its nature in which it is unknown even to itself, that is, knows itself in nothing because it is infinite and supernatural and superessential and beyond everything that can and cannot be understood, but by descending into the principles of things and, as it were, creating itself, it begins to know itself in something.[35]

Perhaps a modern analogy can clarify the point Eriugena is trying to make. Imagine that you are in a strange, indefinable mood, impossible to capture, even to yourself. However, when you improvise on the piano, listening to the music you produce, it suddenly dawns upon you how you feel. So too with God and his creation: it is only when God externalizes himself that he can begin to perceive his own mystery, as in a mirror. Nevertheless, although God can be known as Creator he remains unknowable as uncreated, even to God's self, and all the more so to us: if anyone who saw God understood what he saw, it would not be God that he saw but one of these creatures which derive their existence and unknowability from him.[36]

THE FOUR DIVISIONS AND THE EXITUS AND REDITUS

Let us now return to the division of nature. (1) As indicated, the uncreated creator is, of course, God as the source of all. As we have seen, the divine essence is no-thing, the ineffable and incomprehensible and inaccessible brilliance of divine goodness, surpassing all beings.[37] (2) The things that have been created and create are the primordial causes, that is: the Platonic "forms" or "ideas" existing in the Word of God. They remain in the Word, yet they move outward into created effects. They participate in God's eternity but they are not co-essential.[38] They are created in the beginning in the Word and share in the unknowability of God (Eriugena identifies them with "the waste and the void hanging over the abyss" in Genesis; similarly, the "Fiat lux!" of Gen. 1:3 refers to their procession into created effects – from invisibility to visibility, from unknowability to knowability). Eriugena's view on creation implies that all visible and corporeal things are the symbol of something incorporeal and intelligible[39] – which obviously implies a positive evaluation of the whole of creation. For Eriugena the whole world has a sacramental value.

[35] *Ibid.*, 689B. [36] *Ibid.*, 920C. [37] *Ibid.*, 643B. [38] *Ibid.*, 561D–562A. [39] *Ibid.*, 865D–866A.

(3) From the primordial causes created things flow forth, such as: material things; trees and plants (life); animals (they have senses); human beings (they have reason and share in intellect); and angels (they have intellect): they are created but do not create.

Before we deal with the return of all things, we need to deal with the role of humanity in the created world. As a Christian Neoplatonist Eriugena argues that the true essence of the human person resides in the Word, and is therefore spiritual. The fact that we share with animals a bodily, material nature is the result of the Fall. In its *spiritual* (or "ideal"/"formal") way of being, human nature is eternal, causal and created as intelligible; in its *corporeal* aspect it became temporal, caused and material. Exploiting the fact that there are two creation stories in Genesis (Gen. 1–2:4 and Gen. 2:5ff.) Eriugena therefore distinguishes between two creations of human nature: in the "first" creation a spiritual body and soul were created in the image of God; in a "second" creation human beings acquired materiality (made from the clay of the earth, cf. Gen. 2:7), temporality and division between the sexes.[40] However, these two creations took place simultaneously[41] which implies that human nature sinned as soon as it was created. As God created humanity he simultaneously created the consequences of our sin even before we had sinned! Our mind and reason are creations of the goodness of God; other parts, such as our body – "the tunics of skin," as Gen. 3:21 has it[42] – and the sexual differentiation it involves, were created on account of the transgression which was foreknown.

The notion that sexual differentiation is a result of the Fall is bound to strike us as somewhat strange. It is a view which probably finds its remote origins in the discourse by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* 189e–193e, and which was put forward before Eriugena's time by Gregory of Nyssa in *De Imagine*, chs. 16 and 17 – a text Eriugena was familiar with. Maximus Confessor too adopts this view in his *Ambigua* 41 (1308C–1309B), a text which Eriugena cites in Book II of *Periphyseon*.[43] There are some modest Biblical sources to support his view: first, there is the creation story in which the human being (in a generic sense) is created in God's image, and only later the text says, "male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). According to Eriugena, by the use of the singular, the unity of the human nature before the Fall is indicated ("In the image of God he created him"); but then the plural is used in reference to the division of that nature after the Fall: "Male and female he created them." More importantly are the

[40] *Ibid.*, 797C and 817A–D. [41] *Ibid.*, 807B–C. [42] *Ibid.*, 818D.
[43] *Ibid.*, 532CFf. and 536D–537C.

eschatological texts, especially Paul's assertion in Gal. 3:28 that "in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female."[44] Given the fact that our origin mirrors our end, these texts about the resurrection of Christ reveal something about our initial stage. Eriugena actually admits that the resurrected Christ *appeared* as male but he claims – rather unconvincingly – that this was merely to make sure that his disciples would recognize him in his familiar form.[45] This is an instance in which Eriugena's Neoplatonism (and its typical reservations about the goodness of our sexual being) gets the better of his Christian views.

One of the more interesting aspects of Eriugena's views is that his negative theology is reflected in an equally negative anthropology. The human mind knows that it is, but it does not know what it is; and it is this characteristic "which reveals most clearly the Image of God to be in man":

For just as God is comprehensible in the sense that it can be deduced from his creation that he is, and incomprehensible because it cannot be comprehended by any intellect whether human or angelic nor even by himself what he is, seeing that he is not a thing but is superessential: so to the human mind it is given to know one thing only, that it is – but as to what it is, no sort of notion is permitted to it; and, a fact which is stranger still and, to those who study God and man, more fair to contemplate, the human mind is more honoured in its ignorance than in its knowledge ... just as the negation of God accords better with the praise of his nature than the affirmation and it shows greater wisdom not to know than to know that Nature of which ignorance is true wisdom and which is known all the better for not being known.[46]

The human being, like God himself, cannot be defined or comprehended. Neither God nor the human being can be grasped; they are not a "what."

The human being shares with the angel intelligence and reason, and he shares with animals the possession of a material body and the five senses: therefore humanity occupies a central role in the created world, containing every creature in himself: "In man is contained the universal creature" (*in homine universam creaturam contineri*). "The whole of creation is divided into five parts; the creature may be a body, or a living being, or a sensible being, or a rational being, or an intellectual being. All these five parts are in every way found in man."[47] Like angels, we enjoy the use of mind and reason; like animals, the use of physical sense and the capacity to administer our body.[48]

[44] *Ibid.*, 894B. [45] *Ibid.*, 894B and 594A–D. [46] *Ibid.*, 771B–C.
[47] *Ibid.*, 755B, pp. 396–97. Eriugena applies the word *cosmos* (in *Commentary on John* III.vi.321A) to the human being but he refrains from using the word microcosm in the light of Gregory of Nyssa's critique of this concept, which he quotes in *Periphyseon* 793C.
[48] *Ibid.*, 755B.

The notion that the human being is the universal creature is very important: it allows Eriugena to say that the whole created universe was brought forth in humanity after the Fall, and it also explains the pivotal role of resurrected man in the return of all things. The creation of the body and the material world, the propagation via sexual means, the loss of intellect (we now have to rely on the senses to acquire knowledge) are all the result of our first sin – defined as turning away from God, abandoning the image of God, to become like irrational, mortal animals.[49] Paradise therefore refers to the "ideal" human nature in the image of God; seeing that human beings sinned as soon as they were created, for Eriugena paradise refers to the future rather than to the past. This brings us to the theme of *reditus*, the return of all things to God.

(4) The Return of all things into their Source – that which is not created and does not create – is described in Book V. We have seen that humanity occupies a central role in the created world; similarly, in the return of all things into God humanity plays a key role. When we have reached the bottom of the pit – when we die and our body dissolves – the return starts.[50] Eriugena distinguishes the following stages: (a) the body dissolves and returns into the four elements of the sensible world from which it was composed; (b) in the resurrection each shall take his own body out of the common fund of the four elements; (c) then the body is changed into spirit; (d) the spirit (and the whole human nature) shall revert to its primordial causes; (e) the spirit with the primordial causes is being absorbed into God as air is absorbed into light.[51] Thus, human nature (and all things in human nature) does not perish but is transformed into something better.

Given the fact that "the Return and the resurrection are one and the same thing,"[52] there is a strong Christological dimension to this cosmic process. The goal of the world lies in the causes out of which it originated, and to these it must return.[53] But as the Word is the Cause of all causes, the final End of the world is the Word: the common end of the whole creation is the Word of God.[54] From the unification of the division of the human being into the two sexes, the return and unification through all the other divisions start.[55] In the resurrection, sexual differentiation will be done away with, and human nature will be made one, and there will be only human beings as it would have been if the human being had not sinned. Through the resurrection of the human being, the "universal creature" in whom the whole of creation is contained, the inhabited globe will be transformed into paradise. Earthly bodies will be changed into heavenly bodies. Next there

[49] *Ibid.*, 761A; 817D; 846A. [50] *Ibid.*, 875C. [51] *Ibid.*, 876A. [52] *Ibid.*, 979D.
[53] *Ibid.*, 892D. [54] *Ibid.*, 893A. [55] *Ibid.*, 893C.

will be a unification of the whole sensible creature, followed by a transformation into the intelligible, so that the universal creature becomes intelligible. Finally the universal creature will be unified with its Creator and will be in him and one with him.[56] This unification does not involve the confusion of individual essences and substances: despite the strong Neoplatonic thrust of his cosmic vision, Eriugena nevertheless tries to harmonize it – perhaps unsuccessfully in this instance – with the Christian belief in individual immortality of humans.

It probably has become clear by now that Eriugena rejects a literal understanding of the Genesis story: human nature was never in paradise (understood as a place). As suggested earlier, Eriugena takes the references to "paradise" to refer to the primordial, ideal human nature which exists in the mind of God, and to which creation is drawn back. As Eriugena puts it, commenting on the resurrected Christ:

> From this we learn that the Paradise which he entered when he rose from the dead is nothing else but that very integrity of human nature which he restored in himself, and in which the First Man, had he not sinned, would have continued in glory. This is the Paradise promised to the Saints. Partly, in their souls, they have entered it already; partly, in their bodies, they are still outside. So did he in himself achieve the unification of Paradise and the inhabited globe. He was the Paradise of the inhabited globe himself.[57]

This is by any standards an extraordinary understanding of Paradise. Clearly, Eriugena refuses to understand paradise in a crude material sense. At the time of the general resurrection Christ will convert into spirit all things which humanity acquired from this material world after its transgression, and will bring it into an equal share of heavenly glory of the angels.[58] Finally, Eriugena while quoting Maximus Confessor, states that Christ will "effect the unification of the created nature with the nature that is not created," i.e., God.[59] An interesting implication of Eriugena's views is thus that nothing created will be lost: his doctrine implies that my dogs will have a share in the afterlife: with and in the human nature my canine friends will return into their causes and principles: "all things visible and invisible are created in man, and are therefore destined to rise again with him on the last day."[60]

The last judgement, too, will not take place in any physical place,[61] but each person, good or evil, will behold Christ's coming in herself, in her own conscience, and each person will be judge of her own deeds and thoughts.

[56] *Ibid.*, 893C–D. [57] *Ibid.*, 895A. [58] *Ibid.*, 895B–C. [59] *Ibid.*, 896A.
[60] *Ibid.*, 907A; 912Cff. [61] *Ibid.*, 996C.

Hell will be nothing else than a kind of "psychological" torment: the disappointment and hunger and deprivation of the covetous will of the wicked for the things which they used to desire so inordinately.[62] The wicked will be tormented with grief and sorrow – and that is their hell.[63] Similarly, reward refers to imaginations of good things. The saints, however, will enjoy the theophanies of divine energies and become deified,[64] becoming one with God.

ERIUGENA'S LEGACY

Eriugena's impact on the thought of the Middle Ages after the ninth century is difficult to ascertain.[65] It certainly was not pervasive. A number of important authors, such as Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109), Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141) and Alain of Lille (d. 1202) may have been familiar with some of Eriugena's ideas. In the first half of the twelfth century a summary of the *Periphyseon*, entitled *Clavis physicae* (usually attributed to Honorius Augustodunensis) became an important vehicle for the dissemination of Eriugena's ideas despite the fact that it only existed in a very limited number of manuscripts. Meister Eckhart may have been familiar with the *Clavis*. One of the manuscripts of the *Clavis* was later owned by Nicolas of Cusa who was deeply influenced by Eriugena.

The *Periphyseon* was fairly well known in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – sufficiently well known for the followers of Amaury of Bène (d. 1207) to appeal to it in their defence of their own alleged pantheistic views. This led to an official condemnation of the book in 1225 by Pope Honorius III. After this condemnation few people openly aligned themselves with Eriugena's works.[66] Nevertheless, Eriugena's influence continued. Eriugena's translations of the Dionysian corpus proved influential. His translation of *The Mystical Theology* was sent to the papal librarian Anastasius, who added scholia (explanatory notes, translated from Greek manuscripts present in Roman libraries). Around the middle of the thirteenth century an anonymous scholar added relevant excerpts from the *Periphyseon* to this manuscript, and in this format the book (now containing Eriugena's translation, the scholia translated by Anastasius and the excerpts

[62] *Ibid.*, 936A–B. [63] *Ibid.*, 955B; 961Bff. [64] *Ibid.*, 905A.
[65] For a short but helpful survey of Eriugena's influence, see Moran, *The Philosophy*, 269–81.
[66] In 1684, three years after the *Periphyseon* had been printed, it was duly put on the Index of prohibited books.