

# John Scotus Eriugena

(810–877)

The foremost thinker of the 9th century and author of the first "systematic" presentation of theology

His name

- Eriugena means "a native of Ireland".
- Scotus also means "a native of Ireland".
- also called Joannes Scottus Eriugena

His life

- little known
- He came from Ireland to France, as did others at this time (e.g. Alquin), invited by Charles the Bald, he appeared 847 in France at the court.
- appointed head of the palace school
- commissioned by his royal patron to translate the works of Pseudo-Dionysius into Latin
- controversies on predestination and the Eucharist
- probably died in France
  - The tradition that after the death of Charles the Bald he went to England at the invitation of Alfred the Great, that he taught in a school at Malmesbury, and was there was stabbed to death by his pupils with their pens for 'trying to get them to think' has no historical support.

## His writings

- Translations of the works of Pseudo-Dionysius: "De Coelesti Hierarchia"; "De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia"; "De Divinis Nominibus"; "De Mystica Theologia"; "Epistolae"
- other translations
- Commentaries: on John's Gospel and on Denis the Areopagite
- "Liber de Praedestinatione", and very probably a work on the Eucharist
- his main work: "De Divisione Naturae" (*On The Division of Nature*) (865–870)
- some poems, written partly in Latin and partly in Greek

## His Teachings

- Eriugena regarded man as a microcosm of the wider universe.
- on Predestination
  - just a single predestination, i. e., to grace and salvation, but not to sin.
  - heavily attacked
  - In the Councils of Valencia (855) and Langres (859) Eriugena's doctrine was condemned.
- He seems to have denied the doctrine of Transubstantiation.
- In the "De Divisione Naturae" he divides all of reality into four groups.

- 1. that which creates but is not created: God
  
- 2. that which creates and is created: the Word or Logos
  
- 3. that which is created but does not create: the sensible world
  
- 4. that which neither create nor is created: God as supreme end to which all things are returning

\* All creatures return to God, through the microcosm, and become God, but not in the sense that they cease to exist, but, rather, in the sense that they exist in a better mode.

- "The being of all things is the super-being of God."  
(*esse omnium est superesse Divinitatis*)
  - God is beyond being (*est qui plus quam esse est*)
  - He is non-being.
  
  - We cannot know what God, but only that He is.
  
- So supremely perfect is the essence of the Divinity that God is incomprehensible not only to us but also to Himself.
  - A question that Karl Rahner once posed, without being able to answer it.
  
  - God knows Himself only in His theophanies.

- Hence, the negative mode of predication is preferable.
  - If we have recourse to positive predication, we must use the prefix hyper and say God is hyper-substantia, i.e. more-than-substance, etc.
  - Similarly, when we say that God is the "Creator" of all things we should understand that predicate in a sense altogether distinct from the meaning which we attach to the predicate "maker" or "producer" when applied to finite agents or causes.
  
- Theophanies
  - The "creation" of the world is in reality a theophania, or showing forth of the Essence of God in the things created.
  
- Heretical?
  - The Council of Paris (1225) condemned the *De divisione naturae*.
  - In 1681 'De divisione naturae' was placed on the 'Index of Forbidden Books'.
  
  - Pantheist?
    - \* God is Himself created in His creatures.
    - \* Every creature is in its essence God.
  
- Faith and reason
  - authority

- 
- Faith precedes intellectual knowledge.
  - St. Peter (the symbol of faith) and St. John (the symbol of intelligence) run to the tomb (the symbol of Holy Scripture); both run but Peter enters first.
  - Let our faith do the same.
  - Faith is the only way which leads to understanding!
  
  - Nonetheless, Eriugena teaches that authority proceeds from true reason and reason in no way from authority.
    - \* "The authority of the Sacred Scripture must be followed in all things."<sup>1</sup>
    - \* "An authority cannot really contradict reason. And reason cannot really contradict authority."<sup>2</sup>
    - \* "True authority seems to me to be nothing other than a truth found by reason and written down by the Holy Fathers for the aid of posterity."<sup>3</sup>
  
    - \* "We know that reason is earlier according to nature and authority earlier according to time."<sup>4</sup>
    - \* "Light shines in the darkness of believing souls, it shines more and more while, starting from faith, it tends towards the sight of God."<sup>5</sup>
    - \* "Human nature which naturally desires the source of reason ..."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *De div. nat.*, I, 64.

<sup>2</sup> *De div. nat.*, I, 66: Nulla itaque auctoritas te terreat ab his quae rectae contemplationis rationabilis suasio edocet. Vera enim auctoritas rectae rationi non obsistit neque recta ratio verae auctoritati. Ambo siquidem ex uno fonte, divina videlicet sapientia, manare dubium non est.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>5</sup> *In prol. evang. Joannes*, PL 122, 290B.

<sup>6</sup> *In evang. Joann*, PL 122, 333C–334A.

- \* E. Gilson, *History ...*, 114: "This is why Eriugena considers philosophy and religion as equivalent terms, as indeed they are, in a doctrine where faith begets the desire for intellectual knowledge and where the object of intellectual knowledge is the very contents of faith."
  
- \* "It is therefore certain that true religion is true philosophy, and, conversely, that true philosophy is true religion."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *De praedestinatione*, I, 1; PL 122, 357–458.