



Erigena and the *Division of Nature* George Bosworth Burch

John Scotus Erigena lived in France in the middle of the ninth century. Little is known of his life. He is believed to have been a native of Ireland and to have studied there before coming to France. He occupied the chair of Alcuin as head of the Palace School, and he was a personal friend of the king Charles the Bald, who admired his erudition and his skill at repartee. His reputation for learning was well founded. He studied both the Latin and the Greek Fathers of the Church. This in itself was extraordinary, for at that period Greek was very little read even among persons who pretended to be educated. He took part in the theological controversies of the time, concerning predestination and the eucharist, his contributions being remarkable for their brilliance rather than for their orthodoxy; concerning the former he maintained that there is a predestination to good but not to evil; concerning the latter, that the body of Christ is truly present in the sacrament — but not the physical body; these doctrines followed as corollaries from his philosophy. There is a story that he was summoned to England by Alfred the Great and taught at Malmesbury, where his students were so critical of his lectures that they stabbed him to death with their pens.

Among his scholarly works was a translation from Greek into Latin of the four books of Dionysius — the *Celestial Hierarchy*, the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, the *Divine Names*, and the *Mystical Theology* — together with his ten letters. Their attribution to the disciple of St. Paul endowed these books with an authority second only to that of the Bible, and they had a considerable influence in the later Middle Ages. He also wrote a commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy* — a very useful supplement, for his literal translation, retaining the Greek idiom, is almost unintelligible. Other extant works include a translation of the *Ambigua* of Maximus the Confessor, a homily on the prologue to the Gospel of John, a book on predestination, and several poems in elegiac meter; and still other works have been attributed to him.

His great masterpiece, however, was his book on metaphysics entitled the *Division of Nature*. Synthesizing as it does the philosophical accomplishments of fifteen centuries, this book appears as the final achievement of ancient philosophy. It is written in a clear and facile Latin, without literary pretensions, and has the form of a dialogue between Master and Disciple. The philosophy presented is definitely a system, but there is little system in the presentation. Erigena, like Augustine, followed in his writing not the “order of reason” but the “order of charity,” which requires constant digression in order that no important point may be left unexplained.

In the *Division of Nature* Erigena appears uncompromisingly as a rationalist. It is by reason, and only by reason, that we comprehend nature. But his rationalism does not imply, as in the case of Descartes or Spinoza, a confidence in his ability to fathom all the secrets of nature by his own unaided ratiocinations. Erigena is much more modest. He does not believe either that “good sense is of all things the most equally distributed” or that he is himself unusually well endowed with it. He seeks truth by studying the writings of the Fathers; his actual source of knowledge is authority rather than reason. But there is no opposition between the two. Not only does true authority harmonize with right reason, since both flow from the same font of divine wisdom (511B), but authority is authoritative

only because it is rational. Reason is eternal, and so prior by nature to authority, which is temporal. Authority proceeds from true reason, but reason never proceeds from authority. Authority which is not approved by reason is invalid, but reason depends on its own strength and needs no support from authority. Authority is “nothing except truth discovered by the force of reason and written down by the holy Fathers for the use of posterity” (513B). We follow the authority of the Fathers because we recognize that they were wiser, that is, more rational, than we. To approve our own ideas and disapprove those of others, is most dangerous, prideful, and contentious (814A). “It is not for us to judge the understandings of the holy Fathers, but to adopt them with piety and reverence; nevertheless we are not forbidden to choose that which seems, by consideration of reason, to accord best with the divine scriptures” (548D). Authority is the source of knowledge, but our own reason remains the norm by which all authority must be judged. It must decide what is the true authority; and any doctrine which is repugnant to reason is unhesitatingly to be rejected. The Fathers were wise but not infallible. But even less infallible is the reason of men less wise. In his epilogue Erigena recognizes the imperfection and fallibility of his doctrine, and submits it, to be accepted or rejected, to the reader’s own judgment, which must remain for the reader the ultimate norm of truth. *Let each abound in his own sense*, until the light of perfect vision shall come in the life beyond (1022C).

The subordination of authority to reason must not be understood to apply to the sacred scripture. This is infallible, being the very word of truth. Nothing should be said about God which is not said there. But the Bible is written in an allegorical style, condescending to our weakness (509A). It must not be understood literally. It must be interpreted, and it is by reason and authority that we interpret it. The Bible is not itself philosophy or authority but the material for them. Philosophy is the interpretation of the Bible. *Religion* and *philosophy* are two names for the same thing, which is the humble worship and rational investigation of the first cause of all things (357D). Faith is “a certain beginning by which knowledge of the Creator begins to be produced in the rational nature” (516C); but Erigena knows nothing of a faith which is opposed to reason or which is necessary in addition to reason.

The whole power of discovering the truth of things, he says, is founded on reason and authority (499B); and by these two means he undertakes to investigate nature. The authorities on whom he relies the most frequently are Gregory of Nazianze, Dionysius, and Augustine, whom he considers the most profound interpreters of scripture. He studied Gregory of Nazianze (whom he confused with Gregory of Nyssa) through the writings of his commentator Maximus. His sources include pagan philosophers as well as Christian Fathers; he defends himself against the reproach that he, a Christian, uses pagan materials by the precedent of the children of Israel despoiling the Egyptians (724A). In this spirit, seizing all that is best wherever it may be found, he constructs his system of metaphysics, which is set forth in the *Division of Nature*.

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