



John Scottus Eriugena: Greatest Theologian of Early Medieval Christianity

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The following compilation is based on works by Dermot Moran, Deirdre Carabine and others.¹

The crucially important Christian mystic philosopher, translator, theologian and poet, John Scottus Eriugena (Johannes Scottus Eriugena or Scotus Erigena), lived from about 800 or 810 to perhaps 877 CE and has been praised as the “Greatest mind of the early western Medieval period—or last great mind of Antiquity.”

John “of Ireland” (*Eriugena* means “Irish-born,” where the Scotti were an ancient and extensive tribe) is a major figure in the development of mystical spirituality in western European Christianity. He served as the primary translator-conduit for ideas from the great Greek Christian minds of the Middle-East and Near-East to come into Europe. Richard Woods, expert on the history of Christian spirituality, observes: “It is largely through his efforts that the mystical Neoplatonism of the Eastern Church entered the Latin West.” Or as another writer puts it: “Eriugena was responsible for the meeting of Athens and Rome in Gaul.” (Deirdre Carabine)

Eriugena’s profound theology, later misunderstood and condemned as “pantheism,” actually emphasizes what today many of us would call a pure panentheist view of God’s nature and of the nature of the soul and world. Panen-theism, “all in God,” goes beyond mere pantheism (“all is God”) and mere theism (God is up there, beyond all things down here), to affirm that God or Reality is both immanently within and transcendently beyond all beings.

This mystical panentheism allows God to be truly God, utterly free of all limiting human notions of space-time, distinct entities, finite relationships and other constraints which have more to do with ignorant human conceptions than the actual Divine nature.

Expanding richly on the idea of the *apokatastasis* or “universal salvation” of all souls in God’s all-saving Divine Love (an idea found not only among great theologians of early Christianity like Origen and Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa, but widespread among many Christian churches—see www.apocatastasis.org), Eriugena also wrote of the conscious Return (*reditus*) and merging of all beings into God. No souls (including the souls of animals and the demon-souls) would be left out of this grand return, no one would be damned to suffer forever in hell or wither away into oblivion, as too many Christian theologians and ministers have taught then and now. Eriugena’s enlightened and surprisingly progressive view reveals an astonishingly positive scenario of a triumphantly compassionate, ever-loving God who is the Heart, Source and Substance of everyone.

This view is also radically nondual. As scholar Deirdre Carabine notes in her book-length treatment of Eriugena, a frequently repeated formula in his monumental work, the *Periphyseon*, is that “God is the beginning, middle, and end of the created universe. God is that from which

all things originate, that in which all things participate, and that to which all things eventually return. (*Periphyseon* III.621a-622a). Eriugena illustrates this conception of God as the source of all division and the end of all resolution using the example of the monad (the number one) as the source of all numbers.... The apparent duality of all natura [nature, in the broadest sense of God, souls, world] is the result of deficient human understanding.... In God, there can be no duality; beginning and end have no temporal reality but are simultaneous and can, therefore, be reduced to a unity. (P. II.527b)... Eriugena makes one further bold step...: ‘suppose you join the creature to the creator so as to understand that there is nothing in the former save Him who alone truly is... will you deny that Creator and creature are one?’ (P. II.528b) [The answer, of course, is ‘No.’]... According to Eriugena’s mind, the rationale for this assertion is that nothing apart from God truly is, for all things participate in God, indeed do not have being apart from God. The whole of reality, then, is God since God is source, sustainer, and end.... Despite the reduction of two divisions to one, Eriugena always retains a basic distinction between the self-manifestation of God (theophany) and God (in God’s self). Even in final theophany, when all things have returned to God and God shall be ‘all in all,’ Eriugena never ‘conflates’ God and creature.... God remains transcendentally above all things.”²

Eriugena is eulogized by philosopher G.G. Coulton as “coming out of the darkness like a meteor,” and acclaimed by Bertrand Russell as “the most astonishing figure of the early Medieval period.” Catholic historians have called him western Christianity’s best mind and most truly constructive mind between St. Augustine (bishop of Hippo, N. Africa, d.430) and St. Anselm (archbishop of Canterbury, d.1109). Richard Woods calls him “the most brilliant and daring Christian philosopher between Augustine and Thomas Aquinas [d.1274].”³

I daresay Eriugena is far more mystically sublime than Augustine, Anselm or even Aquinas (who only rose into mysticism near life’s end), and Eriugena’s beautiful balance of transcendence and immanence in describing the Divine, along with a radically nondual orientation to his theology, and his idea of all beings returning to and merging in God allows Christianity to share much common ground with the mystical depths of other religious traditions, especially those of western and eastern Asia (Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism, the high Tantra teachings, contemplative Taoism, and certain developments within Muslim Sufi mysticism and contemplative Jewish Kabbalah).

On Eriugena’s biography, Carabine remarks, “The one word that most aptly describes the Irishman is ‘enigmatic,’ and it is well-deserved. Almost everything we can say about Eriugena [regarding the facts and details of his life] can be questioned: we do not know precisely when he was born, and he is no longer heard of after 870.”⁴

What we do know is that he was born in Ireland and educated in Irish monasteries, and then came to the itinerant court of King Charles I (Charles the Bald, 823-877) in France around 847 CE. Eriugena was likely fleeing the destructive Viking raids ravaging his homeland from around the turn of the 9th century onward. After first working as a teacher of liberal arts (grammar, dialectics, etc.) at the famous Palace School or Palatine Academy at Laon, at King Charles’ invitation he became director of the Palatine. Charles, grandson of Charlemagne (742-814), carried on his grandfather’s renewal of massive royal patronage of learning, both secular and spiritual. Eriugena enjoyed Charles’ special favor and remained in France for 30 years. Under his leadership, the Palatine School flourished and grew famous.

One tradition has it that toward the end of his life he went to Britain to become Abbot of Malmesbury in southern England. William of Malmesbury, who makes this claim, goes on to say that his students stabbed him fatally with their pens. Scholars wonder whether this is to be taken literally or figuratively. Literally, they may have killed him due to his emphasis on too many Greek Christian themes in preference to the ideas of the Latin Fathers; figuratively, it may mean that “the dullness of his students’ work literally killed, not only his spirit, but also his body!” as Carabine writes—a not unlikely consequence for a high-flying genius of Eriugena’s caliber. But this bizarre story probably pertains to another “John of Ireland” entirely. It is much more likely that Eriugena stayed in France and died, according to some evidence, around 877.

Eriugena was either a simple monk or a lay deacon (he wrote at least one sermon that we know about), but he was of no special rank in the church hierarchy. Nevertheless, while in France during the productive period of his life, through his erudition he led a colony of a dozen Irish scholars and monks, most of them refugees, among a group of fifty or so international

scholars who had come to the imperial court of Charlemagne and his heirs. “John stood out for his brilliance and daring” and for his knowledge of Greek—a rarity at that time in western Europe. Carabine says that, given the Byzantium-loving Carolingian court’s “predilection for things Greek, there is no doubt that because of Eriugena’s linguistic abilities he would have found great favor with his king and patron.” It was Eriugena’s masterful, creative use of the Neoplatonist-influenced, Greek-speaking Christian theologians of the East along with Augustine and Ambrose of the West that makes him such an important figure, richly seeding western mystical tradition with many of its most powerful, sublime and beautiful ideas.

Thomas Cahill, in his widely read work, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, speaks thusly of Eriugena’s importance as “the first philosopher of the Middle Ages, the first truly Christian philosopher since the death of Augustine in 430, the first European philosopher since the execution of Boethius in 524, the first man in three hundred years who was able to think.... To read his *De Divisione Naturae* (*The Division of Nature* [also called the *Periphyseon*]) after immersion in the [European] folk literature we have been reading is a shocking experience: one is back in the world of Plato. Here is a mind that could grasp the most rarefied distinctions of the Greek philosophical tradition and, far more important, could elaborate a new system of thought, one that is balanced and internally consistent. It has more than a soupçon of Celticity in it, however, for John Scotus’ favorite word is Nature, a word beloved of the Irish but one that never failed to raise the hackles of both Platonists and Roman Christians. In John Scotus’ system Nature is a virtual synonym for Reality—all of reality, our natural world as well as the reality of God. In Scotus there is no useful distinction between natural and supernatural.... Reality is a continuum, and all God’s creatures are theophanies of God himself, for God speaks in them and through them.... [Scotus] boldly opposed reason to authority: ‘Every authority that is not confirmed by true reason seems to be weak; whereas true reason does not need to be supported by an authority.’ And this bit of sententiousness he dared apply to the fathers of the church! More than this, he took the perfectly orthodox statement of Paul that in the end ‘God will be all in all’ and used it... to suggest that at the end of time everyone—even the devils—will be saved [because God’s love is all-embracing and all-powerful]! In 1225, almost four centuries after it was written, Pope Honorius III ordered all copies of *De Divisione Naturae* to be burned. Some, obviously, escaped the bonfire. But in the age of John Scotus Eriugena, Christian churchmen did not burn books. Only barbarians did that.”²⁵

The first of the works known to have been written by Eriugena was a treatise on the Eucharist, which unfortunately has not survived. In this work he apparently articulated the idea that the Eucharist was merely symbolic or commemorative, a view for which later theologians were censured and condemned. Yet Eriugena’s orthodoxy was not at the time held suspect.

He was then selected by Hincmar, the archbishop of Reims, to defend the doctrine of man’s free will against the extreme pre-destinarianism of the troubled monk-theologian Gottschalk of Saxon. Eriugena’s first theological work that has come down to us is this commissioned treatise, entitled *On Predestination*. Alas, it pleased neither side of the debate and was condemned by two Church councils in 855 and 859 as not fully expressing the orthodox view. Eriugena had dared to disagree with Augustine, denying the heavenly predestination of the elect souls. Yet the work contains beautiful theology, and it begins by claiming that true religion and true philosophy are one and the same.

A leading Eriugena scholar, Dermot Moran, synthesizes the main thrust of this early work: “Eriugena argues in *De Divina Praedestinatione* that God, being perfectly good, wants all humans to be saved, and does not predestine souls to damnation.... ‘Sin, death, unhappiness are not from God.’ Since God is outside time, He cannot be said to fore-know or to pre-destine, terms that involve temporal predicates.”

Moreover, there can only be a single destination for all: eternal salvation in God, for evil is only an overlaid form of ignorance, and its only “reality” is that it constitutes a flawed effort toward the Good. The only hell, a temporary one (though it may last eons for some souls), is ignorance. The *essential* nature of the sinner is not involved in sin, since every nature in its essence is Divine, for all are created by/in/of God. God alone is the ever-lasting Real, the eternal Reality.

Around 858, Eriugena was invited by his good friend King Charles and Byzantine Emperor Michael to attempt a new and better translation of the key writings of Dionysius the Areopagite—

the pseudonym of an anonymous Christian Neoplatonist monk writing hugely important tracts circa 500 CE, probably in Syria, taking the name of a 1st century disciple of Paul. Pseudo-Denys was the greatest early exponent of mystical apophatic or *via negativa* “negative way” theology, the way of coming to God through negating all images, concepts and identifications until one realizes God’s true nature as formless, imperceptible, timeless, spaceless, changeless Spirit, the Life of all lives, pure Infinity, the Absolute beyond affirmation or denial. Pseudo-Denys had also written some tracts on the *via positiva* or kataphatic way of praising God with positive attributes, but it was his apophatic works that were so mystically provocative.

Though Eriugena’s own originality led him to sometimes diverge in his writings from pseudo-Denys, it is clear that he owes much in his thinking to the Areopagite, as do so many Western Christian mystics who learned of these apophatic insights through Eriugena. Moran writes: “The discovery of Dionysius had a profound effect on Eriugena’s thinking. He enthusiastically adopted the Areopagite’s main ideas (many of which appear to be drawn from Proclus’ *Commentary on the Parmenides*), e.g. the distinction between affirmative and negative theology, according to which denials concerning God (e.g. ‘God is not good [in the way we know goodness]’) are ‘more true,’ (*verior*) ‘better’, ‘more apt’, than affirmations (‘God is good’), as well as the analysis of the divine names as applying only metaphorically ... and not literally (*proprie*) to God, who is ‘beyond all that is.’ For Pseudo-Dionysius, we do not know God directly but know Him only through his *theophaniai*, or divine appearances... We could, in affirmative theology, attribute attributes to God, because He is the ‘cause of all,’ ... but in fact God in His nature is transcendent and ‘unknowable’, he is the ‘more-than-divine divinity’, which Eriugena renders as *superdeus deitas* in his translation.... Pseudo-Dionysius claims that God is the affirmation of all things, the negation of all things, and beyond all affirmation and denial.”

Richard Woods comments on Eriugena’s translation of Pseudo-Dionysius’ treatises: “John’s work was not only successful; it opened the floodgates of Neoplatonic Christian mysticism of the Eastern Church to the West.”

“It has often been stated,” writes Carabine, “that what we find in Eriugena’s work is a constant battle between Augustine [himself once an ardent Neoplatonist] and the Pseudo-Dionysius, broadly understood as West versus East. While that characterization is not entirely false, it could be said that Eriugena was simply trying to bring the diverse strands of Christian theology into agreement.... Eriugena often takes the side of a Greek father in preference to the priority of Augustine.... Despite the very powerful and formative influence of Augustine, Eriugena was more Greek than Latin in his approach to created reality and its relationship with Divine reality.... [He] genuinely sided with the Greek fathers on many important issues.... [His] conception of the whole of humanity as in the image of God eventually to be restored to its divine exemplar, is more obviously Greek than Latin in its theocentric character. The concept of deification (of human being becoming God), which Eriugena notes is more difficult for the Latins (with the exception of Ambrose), is a very powerful Greek thematic in [his work].... The ideas he drew on from the great Eastern [Christian] fathers opened a new window onto a fresh understanding of human and divine reality.... Few Western thinkers have dared to conceive of a metaphysical or theological analysis of reality that combines elements of both East and West.... The ideas elaborated in [his work] can be understood as a very powerful alternative to the views elaborated by Augustine and later by Aquinas.”⁶

Around 862, after completing his translation of Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena began to translate other important Greek Christian texts, including the commentaries of Maximus the Confessor (580-662) and an important work by Gregory of Nyssa (d. c395), the *De hominis opificio*, under the title of *De imagine*, which, among its many influential insights, gave Eriugena an account of human nature as an image of the divine. A fragmentary *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John (Commentarius in Evangelium Iohannis)* and a sermon (*Homilia in Johannem*) on the Prologue to St John’s Gospel were also written toward the end of Eriugena’s life, probably in the late 860s or 870s. This latter work, the *Homilia* (see excerpts below), is a lyrical, polished pondering on the first 17 verses of the Gospel of John, and is, says Dermot Moran, “one of the greatest homilies of medieval spiritual literature.” The many manuscripts of the *Homilia* in Benedictine and Cistercian and other collections attest to its popularity in the medieval period, though it was only rarely attributed to Eriugena.

Moran further reports: “A number of interesting poems survive showing the breadth of Eriugena’s learning; but also portray him as a courtier quite well versed in political affairs.” And in that role he wielded a sharp wit, as noted by Cahill. Eriugena also seems to have been very interested in music and medicine.



In the early 860s, just after he had completed the translation of Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena commenced his major work, *Periphyseon*, also entitled in some manuscripts, *De divisione naturae* (*On the Division of Nature*), probably finishing it around 867. This nearly 250,000-word masterpiece in five books is a long dialogue between an anonymous ‘Teacher’ (*nutritor*) and his ‘Student’ (*alumnus*). Carabine explains how this literary device of master and disciple discussing issues “introduces a very human element into a difficult work. At times the alumnus is confused, shocked, surprised, bored, restless or doggedly questioning the nutritor until the point of discussion has been clarified to his satisfaction.”

The *Periphyseon*, says Moran, “attempts to be a compendium of all knowledge presented within a Neoplatonic cosmology of the procession and return of all things from the divine One. . . . The *Periphyseon*, deeply influenced by Eriugena’s engagement with Greek Christian authors, is a work of astonishing scope, a veritable Neoplatonic *summa*.” Yet, “despite the claims of some 19th-century commentators, it is now clear that Eriugena did not have direct knowledge of the writings of [the Neoplatonists] Plotinus, Porphyry or Proclus. He had almost no contact with pagan Neoplatonism in general.”

In any case, Christopher Bamford notes: “This astounding synthesis of theology, philosophy, cosmology and anthropology . . . represent a perfect, nondualistic fusion of Christianity and Platonism and constitutes the only philosophical alternative in the West to the Aristotelian scholasticism of St. Thomas Aquinas.”⁷ Among other differences, it presumes no opposition between being and consciousness or between consciousness and nature.

Moran clarifies the vast topic upon which Eriugena chose to write in his *Periphyseon*: “Nature is to be understood as what is real in the widest sense, the totality of all things that are and are not. . . . Nature includes both God and creation and has four divisions: nature which creates and is not created (God), nature which creates and is created (the Primordial Causes [the *Logos* or Word of God]), nature which is created and does not create (the Created Temporal Effects), and nature which is neither created nor creates (Non-Being [or God as Supreme End / Mergence Point]).”

In the following several paragraphs, we hear Moran continuing his insightful assessment of the brilliant theologian (excerpted from Moran’s excellent 2004 article “John Scottus Eriugena” for the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy):

Eriugena enthusiastically incorporated many Greek Christian theological concepts. God, the One, creates by self-emanation. Creation is a timeless, and hence on-going and always contemporary, event. Human nature is originally a Platonic Idea in the mind of God: human nature is a certain intellectual concept formed eternally in the mind of God (*Periphyseon*, IV.768b). Humans fail to understand their true nature as image of God in God, because they are distracted by created, fleeting temporal “appearances” (*phantasiai*), which entrap the intellect in the clouded spatio-temporal realm of sense. However, through intellectual contemplation (*theoria, intellectus*) and divine illumination (which is the receiving of a divine self-manifestation, *theophania*), humans may achieve unification (henosis) with God, and the select few will even undergo “deification” (*deificatio, theosis*) which Eriugena interprets as complete identity with God. Eriugena articulates the view that God’s becoming human (His incarnation or inhumanisation) is balanced cosmologically by humans becoming God in deification (*deificatio*, Greek: *theosis*). The phrase “God was made man so that man could be made God” (Latin: *factus est Deus homo, ut homo fieret Deus*) is a commonplace among the Christian Fathers, especially in the Eastern tradition. It is to be found in Greek in St. Irenaeus, in St. Athanasius (298-373) in his treatise *De incarnatione* 54, 3 (PG 25, 192B); and, in Latin, in St. Augustine, (e.g., his sermon *In natali Domini* VIII, PL 38: 1009 footnote;

and *In natali Domini* XII, PL 39 1997) and elsewhere. There are several passages where Eriugena (following St. Augustine and Maximus Confessor) balances the humanisation of God with the deification of man (see for instance his *Homilia* XXIII, PL 122 296A-C; *Commentarius in Evangelium Iohannis* I, xxiv, PL 122 300A). It is often expressed in terms of man becoming “by grace” (*per gratiam*) what God is “by nature” (*per naturam*). Eriugena follows the Greek formulation of the Council of Nicaea (NB: not the Latin version) and the Greek Christian tradition (specifically Maximus Confessor [c580-662]) in occasionally distinguishing between *inhumanatio* (Greek: *enanthropesis*)—the relation between the Second Person of the Trinity and human nature—and *incarnatio* (Greek: *sarkosis*)—the temporal becoming flesh of the Verbum in Jesus (see for instance *Periphyseon* I.449B; and *Homilia* XIX, PL 122 294C). Eriugena refers to the theosis or deification of human nature at *Periphyseon* I.449b (and elsewhere, see *Periphyseon* IV.743A, IV.760d) and draws extensively on Maximus for the view that there will be a reunification of human nature with the divine (see *Periphyseon* II.536d ff). In his *Homilia* Eriugena writes: “Of deification, however, I say, that man and God are united in the unity of the one substance” (*Deificationis autem, dico, qua homo et deus in unitatem unius substantiae adunati sunt*, PL 122 296C).

Eriugena ... in Book Three give[s] a very complex discussion of the meaning of “*ex nihilo*” in the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* [creation from nothing].... When Eriugena calls God ‘nothing’ [or No-thing], he means that God transcends all created being, God is *nihil per excellentiam* (“nothingness on account of excellence”) or, as he puts it, *nihil per infinitatem* (“nothingness on account of infinity”). Matter, on the other hand, is also called “nothing” but it is “nothing through privation” (*nihil per privationem*). Similarly, created things are called “nothing” because they do not contain in themselves their principles of subsistence (Eriugena is here repeating St. Augustine’s view that the creature, considered apart from God, is mere nothing). [...]

God is non-being through the excellence of His nature which transcends all being. Since there is nothing outside God, “creation from nothing” cannot mean creation from some principle outside God, rather it means: creation out of God’s superabundant nothingness [No-thingness]. God creates out of himself (*a se*) and all creation remains within him. [...]

Periphyseon Book One examines the first division, God understood as a transcendent One above, and yet cause of, all creation. God transcends everything; He is, following Pseudo-Dionysius, the “negation of all things” (*negatio omnium*, III.686d). According to Eriugena—who in this respect is following a tradition which includes Augustine and Boethius as well as Dionysius and other Greek authors—the Aristotelian categories are considered to describe only the created world and do not properly apply to God (I.463d). God cannot “literally” (*proprie*) be said to be substance or essence (*ousia, essentia*), nor can He be described in terms of quantity, quality, relation, place or time. He is “superessentialis” (I.459d), a term which, for Eriugena, belongs more to negative theology than to affirmative. His “being” is “beyond being.” Eriugena particularly admires a Dionysian saying from the Celestial Hierarchy: ... “for the being of all things is the Divinity above being,” which he translates as *esse omnium est superesse divinitatis* (“the being of all things is the super-being of divinity,” III.686d, I.443b; see also I.516c; III.644b, V.903c). This is perhaps Eriugena’s favourite phrase from Dionysius. (Indeed Maximus Confessor had also commented on it....) Sometimes, instead of invoking the Dionysian formula *superesse divinitatis*, Eriugena speaks of the “divine superessentiality” (*divina superessentialitas*, III.634b), or—quoting *Divine Names* I 1-2—of the “superessential and hidden divinity” (*superessentialis et occulta divinitas*, I.510b). God is a “nothingness” (*nihilum*) whose real essence is unknown to all created beings, including the angels (447c). Indeed, Eriugena argues in a radical manner, following Maximus Confessor, that God’s nature is infinite and uncircumscribable, such that He is unknown [not knowable as a separate object] even to Himself, since He is the

“infinity of infinities” and beyond all comprehension and circumscription.

Along this line, Deidre Carabine tells how Eriugena preserved an important distinction made by Pseudo-Dionysius: “Eriugena is not content simply to deny the validity of all affirmations, for negative statements alone have little meaning. He develops what I have elsewhere called the hyperphatic way of speaking about God so familiar from the words of Pseudo-Dionysius. Since what can be said of God cannot be said properly, either affirmatively or negatively, Eriugena suggests that we use the prefixes *super* or *plus quam*. God is truth; God is not truth; God is more than truth. (*Periphyseon* IV.757d-758a) The ‘more than’ does not tell us anything about God but it captures the negative while outwardly remaining positive in construction.... Even the terms ‘unity,’ ‘God,’ and ‘Trinity’ are subjected to the scrutiny of his penetrating analysis: God is, properly speaking, ‘*plus quam deus*’ [more than God] and ‘*plus quam trinitas*’ (P I.459d-460a, 456d). In this sense the meaning of ‘*nihil*’ [God as “No-thing”] is made clear for it simply means that God is ‘*plus quam essentia*’ [more than essence] (P III.634b,c, 680d).... When Eriugena denies something of God, he is not saying that God is not that thing or is [merely] nothing but is saying that God is the no-thingness that, paradoxically, is everything.... The relentless and insistent manner in which Eriugena questions and casts suspicion on all linguistic and cognitive processes leads both word and thought to the very edge of their meaning before a further negation casts them into a new matrix of meaning, which itself will be subject to subsequent transformation.... Eriugena’s method confronts us with the full force of the inexplicable nature of God as the reconciliation of all opposites, for in God there cannot be opposition, and things in discord cannot be eternal. (P I.453a,459a).”⁸

Moran identifies a most interesting point in Eriugena’s thought: “In the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena repeats the position of the *De Praedestinatione* that God does not know evil, and, in a genuine sense, God may be said not to know anything; his ignorance is the highest wisdom.”

We might interrupt Moran to say that this Divine “ignorance” or “unknowing” is an ancient idea from various traditions East and West, from the *Upanishads* and Chinese contemplative Daoist/Taoist sages to Parmenides and Empedocles among the pre-Socratics. It suggests that God’s “relationship” to the Kosmos, that is, God’s relationship to what God emanates, is a relationship of consciously being all the beings of creation rather than merely knowing them as “things” separate from Himself.

Moran continues his presentation of Eriugena’s key ideas:

Eriugena conceives of the act of creation as a kind of self-manifestation wherein the hidden transcendent God creates himself by manifesting himself in divine outpourings or theophanies (I.446d). He moves from darkness into the light, from self-ignorance [i.e., not knowing Himself as an object] into self-knowledge. The divine self-creation or self-manifestation (I.455b) is, at the same time (or rather timelessly), the expression of the Word [*Logos*] and hence the creation of all other things, since all things are contained in the Word. The Word enfolds in itself the Ideas or Primary Causes of all things and in that sense all things are always already in God:

[Eriugena:] ‘...the Creative nature permits nothing outside itself because outside it nothing can be, yet everything which it has created and creates it contains within itself, but in such a way that it itself is other, because it is superessential, than what it creates within itself’ (*Periphyseon*, III.675c).

God’s transcendent otherness above creatures is precisely that which allows creatures to be within God and yet other than God. Eriugena stresses both the divine transcendence above and immanence in creation. The immanence of God in the world is at the same time the immanence of creatures within God. Creatures however, as fallen, do not yet know that they reside in God. In cosmological terms, however, God and the creature are one and the same:

[Eriugena:] ‘It follows that we ought not to understand God and the creature as two things distinct from one another, but as one and the same. For both the creature,

by subsisting, is in God; and God, by manifesting himself, in a marvelous and ineffable manner creates himself in the creature...’ (*Periphyseon*, III.678c).

[Eriugena:] ‘God does not know of Himself what He is because He is not a “what,” being in everything incomprehensible both to Himself and to every intellect ... But He does not recognize Himself as being something (Se ipsum autem non cognoscit aliquid esse) ... For if He were to recognize Himself in something He would show that He is not in every respect infinite and incomprehensible.’ (*Periphyseon*, II.589b-c).

[Moran:] A human being too knows that he or she is, but he or she too cannot comprehend or circumscribe his or her essence or nature, since that too is infinite in some sense. All that can be done is to specify the “circumstances” which surround his essence, e.g. place, time, rest, motion, condition, etc. (II.586d). The human being in this sense is an image of the infinite and uncircumscribable God, and an image is identical to its archetype in all respects “except in respect of subject” (*praeter rationem subiecti*, II.598b). Any difference between God and human nature is the result not of essence but of “an accident produced by sin” (*sed ex delicto accidit*, II.598b). Human self-ignorance mirrors the divine self-ignorance; human incomprehensibility mirrors divine incomprehensibility. This makes human nature share in infinity... Just as God is infinite and unbounded, human nature is indefinable and incomprehensible and open to infinite possibility and perfectibility (V.919c); God’s transcendence and immanence are reflected in human transcendence and immanence with regard to its world. Consider the following remarkable passage from Book Four which is a typical example of Eriugena’s dialectical thinking and of the close parallelism between human and divine:

[Eriugena:] ‘For just as God is both beyond all things and in all things—for He Who only truly is, is the essence of all things, and while He is whole in all things He does not cease to be whole beyond all things, whole in the world, whole around the world, whole in the sensible creature, whole in the intelligible creature, whole creating the universe, whole created in the universe, whole in the whole of the universe and whole in its parts, since He is both the whole and the part, just as He is neither the whole nor the part—in the same way human nature in its own world (in its own subsistence) in its own universe and in its invisible and visible parts is whole in itself, and whole in its whole, and whole in its parts, and its parts are whole in themselves and whole in the whole.’ (*Periphyseon*, IV.759a-b).

[Moran:] Elsewhere Eriugena asserts that God is the “essence of all things” (*essentia omnium*) and the “form of all things” (*forma omnium*). In the thirteenth century, expressions such as these led to the accusation of heresy, i.e. that Eriugena is collapsing the difference between God and creation. It must be noted, however, that although Eriugena asserts the identity of God and creation, he explicitly rejects the [pantheist] view that God is the “genus” or “whole” (*totum*) of which the creatures are “species” or “parts.” Only metaphorically (*metaforice*, translative) can it be said that God is a “genus” or a “whole.” Assertions concerning the immanence of God in creation are always balanced in Eriugena’s writings by assertions of God’s transcendence above all things. God is both “form of all things” and also is without form, formless. Since God cannot be said to be anything, God cannot be simply identified with any or every creature either.

Clearly, as evidenced by Moran’s careful analysis of the Irishman’s work, we have in Eriugena not only great balance, but also a subtle, intuitive mind that realizes what is at stake in trying to utilize the possibilities of language for expressing the nature of Divine Nature. This is a Divine Reality so entirely *Absolute* (not relative), so purely *Subject-ive* (not an object or object-oriented), and so utterly paradoxical in qualities and capacities that the object-conditioned human mind, a product of relativity and dualistic logic, cannot satisfactorily conceptualize or grasp this True Nature.

Only the purest, non-objective Intuition, a nondual Knowing-by-Being, suffices here. This is God immanently within the personal consciousness “knowing-being” God via Divine capacity, not by mere human capacity.

On the topic of creatures, Moran clarifies that, for Eriugena, “The whole spatio-temporal world and our corporeal bodies are a consequence of the Fall, an emanation of the mind. . . . His considered position appears to be that God, foreseeing that man would fall, created a body and a corporeal world for him. But this corporeal body is not essential to human nature and in the return of all things to God, the body will be absorbed back into the spiritual body (*spirituale corpus*) and the spiritual body back to the mind (*mens*). The corporeal world will return to its incorporeal essence . . . as a definition in the mind (V.889d).”

Eriugena, like the most brilliant theologians of the early Church, Origen and Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus Confessor, has a shinningly optimistic view of what the early Greek Fathers termed “*apokatastasis*,” universal restoration or salvation: the idea that God’s Love is so perfect and powerful, His Will so Almighty (“all things are possible with God”), that all souls—even Satan and demons—will ultimately return to God’s Love and be saved, sanctified and awakened to God.

Let us hear a lot more of analysis on this colossally important theme in Eriugena’s work from Moran:

Books Four and Five [of the *Periphyseon*], originally planned as one book, discuss the return (*epistrophe, reditus, reversio*) of all things to God. According to the cosmic cycle Eriugena accepts, drawing heavily on Maximus Confessor and Maximus’ interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa, it is in the nature of things for effects to return to their causes. There is a general return of all things to God. Corporeal things will return to their incorporeal causes, the temporal to the eternal, the finite will be absorbed in the infinite. The human mind will achieve reunification with the divine, and then the corporeal, temporal, material world will become essentially incorporeal, timeless, and intellectual. Human nature will return to its “Idea” or “notio” in the mind of God. According to Eriugena’s interpretation of scripture, “paradise” is the scriptural name for this perfect human nature in the mind of God. Humans who refuse to let go of the “circumstances” remain trapped in their own phantasies, and it is to this mental state that the scriptural term “hell” applies. Aside from the general return of all things to God, Eriugena claims there is a special return whereby the elect achieve “deification” (*deificatio, theosis*) whereby they will merge with God completely, as lights blend into the one light, as voices blend in the choir, as a droplet of water merges with the stream. God shall be all in all (*omnia in omnibus*, V 935c).

Eriugena’s cosmological account has been criticized for collapsing the differences between God and creation, leading to a heresy later labeled as pantheism [remember: Eriugena, like all great mystics, is better viewed as a *panen*-theist or absolute theist, no mere pantheist or theist]. There is no doubt that Eriugena’s theological intentions are orthodox, but he is a bold, speculative thinker, who believes that philosophy uncovers the true meaning of faith. Eriugena (as does Nicholas of Cusa) gives a unique place to Christ in the outgoing and return of all things. Christ is the coming together of the divine and the created orders. Christ possesses all the perfections of human nature, since *vir autem perfectus est Christus* (IV. 743b), and Christ is also one in substance with God. Eriugena recognizes that Christ is unique and that the individual is not collapsed into the universal, even in the return. Humans will always be different from God in that they have been created and God is Creator (IV.796b). However, a case can also be made for saying that Eriugena really intends his perfected human nature to possess divine attributes in a genuine way. The argument turns on an answer to the following question: To what extent is man made in the image and likeness of God? Eriugena has two answers: an image is not an image unless it is identical to its exemplar in all respects “except number” or “subject” (*excepta subiecti ratione*, IV.778a). From this we may conclude that man differs from God *in subiecto*, that is, there is solely a difference in number. But difference in number does not mean that God and man stand apart from each other as two identical billiard balls would occupy different places. *Neither God nor man*

is in space or time; both are incorporeal, and hence numerical difference, or difference in subject, can only have the Neoplatonic meaning that the first will always differ from what comes after the first. God is first, and hence man comes after. But “after” (post-) here has no temporal meaning, as Eriugena emphasizes (IV.808a). A second answer he gives is that *God is creator and man is created, but since creation is self-manifestation, that amounts to saying no more than that God manifests himself fully in man.* [Emphasis added in italics.] Eriugena sometimes qualifies this by saying that man is by grace (*per gratiam*) what God is by nature, quoting Maximus Confessor (e.g. V.879c-880a), but elsewhere, especially in the concept of theophany or divine manifestation, he fuses the notion of nature with that of grace: all natures are theophanies, that is produced by grace. God is the source of both *dona* [gifts of grace] and *data* [what are given in nature], both are revelations of the divine nature. Indeed there are many places where Eriugena cites texts (e.g. Maximus) to suggest that God and man mirror each other... This notion of the intertwining and merging of minds is at the very core of Eriugena’s mysticism and of his understanding of the relation between human and divine natures and their coming together in the person of Christ. Christ is actually what all human beings can be and will be, that is precisely the promise of salvation for Eriugena. Consider the following passage from Book Two:

[Eriugena:] ‘For if Christ, Who understands all things, (Who) indeed is the understanding of all things, really unified all that He assumed, who doubts then that what first took place in the Head and principal Exemplar of the whole of human nature will eventually happen in the whole?’ (*Periphyseon*, II.545a)

[Moran:] “This clearly implies that humanity as a whole, that is, resurrected human nature in its perfected state, will be truly illuminated and merged with the divine, for human nature itself in its very essence is the intellectus omnium. Furthermore, the use of the future tense here is somewhat misleading, since time itself is a function of our fallen state and the perfected state is timeless so there is a sense in which perfected human nature already is one with God and always has been one with God. Eriugena, then, has a dialectical understanding of the relation of God and man which can be viewed as orthodox from one point of view, but which is always transgressing the boundaries of orthodoxy in the direction of a view which has God and man mutually contemplating themselves and each other, in an endless, eternal play of theophanies. Thus, a kind of mystical humanism is celebrated in *Periphyseon*, Book Four, a humanism explicated through the dialectic of self-knowledge and ignorance.”

Concerning Eriugena’s view of sin, one anonymous scholar has written: “If God is true being, then sin can have no substantive existence; it cannot be said that God knows of sin, for to God knowing and being are one. In the universe of things, as a universe, there can be no sin; there must be perfect harmony. Sin, in fact, results from the will of the individual who falsely represents something as good which is not so. This misdirected will is punished by finding that the objects after which it thirsts are in truth vanity and emptiness. Hell is not to be regarded as having local existence; it is the inner state of the sinful will. As the object of punishment is not the will or the individual himself, but the misdirection of the will, so the result of punishment is the final purification and redemption of all. Even the devils shall be saved. All, however, are not saved at once; the stages of the return to the final unity, corresponding to the stages in the creative process, are numerous, and are passed through slowly. The ultimate goal is *deificatio*, *theosis* or resumption into the divine being, when the individual soul is raised to a full knowledge of God, and where knowing and being are one. After all have been restored to the divine unity, there is no further creation. The ultimate unity is that which neither is created nor creates.”⁹

Continuing with Moran’s analysis: “In Eriugena’s conceptions of God, the cosmos and human nature, there is an extraordinarily bold emphasis on infinity. God is infinite and manifests Himself infinitely in His theophanies; the causes themselves are infinite; the created cosmos too would be infinite were it not for the Fall; finally, human nature is essentially unbounded

and infinite. The Holy Scriptures too have a kind of infinite richness: *Sacrae scripturae interpretatio infinita* est, II.560a. Employing an original simile, Eriugena claims that the number of interpretations of Holy Scripture is like the innumerable colors in a peacock's tail (IV.749c). Human understanding and learning are also endless. Eriugena celebrates the lack of limit and inherent transcendence not just of human nature but also of the whole of nature. Nature as a whole is an infinite series of theophanies. This conception of God as 'more than infinite' and as the 'infinity of infinities' is Eriugena's most significant contribution to philosophy, one that attracted both the attention of medieval mystics and later of German Idealists."

Richard Woods, a leading historian of Christian spirituality, assesses the *Periphyseon* as "a surprisingly original work for the time. John's sources included Augustine, Ambrose, Marius Victorinus, and Boethius as well as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Maximus the Confessor. Long and difficult, the *Periphyseon* eventually elicited charges of pantheism [sic] and other heresies against its author when read by less well-educated minds in subsequent centuries. But its importance lay less in its orthodoxy, which is now recognized to be generally solid, than in the fact that through it, Eastern Christian Neoplatonism successfully entered the West at the very dawning of the Middle Ages. John the Scot's influence on later medieval theologians and spiritual writers was profound... As much misunderstood as those of Origen had been and [Meister] Eckhart's would be, his teachings were unjustly condemned at the Councils of Vercelli in 1050 and Rome in 1059, and finally in a Bull of Pope Honorius III in 1225."

Moran assesses the influence and importance of Eriugena for crucial later medieval mystics like Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa:

Eriugena's *Periphyseon* had immediate influence in France, notably at the schools of Laon, Auxerre and Corbie. His translations of Pseudo-Dionysius were widely used.... Hugh of Saint Victor, Alanus of Lille, and Suger of Saint-Denis were among those influenced by Eriugena. In the 13th century, however, the *Periphyseon* was linked with the writings of David of Dinant and Amaury of Bène, two theologians at the University of Paris, and was condemned with them in 1210 and 1225..... In the later Middle Ages both Meister Eckhart of Hochheim (c1260-c1328) and Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) were sympathetic to Eriugena and familiar with his *Periphyseon*. Cusanus owned a copy of the *Periphyseon*. Interest in Eriugena was revived by Thomas Gale's first printed edition of 1687. However, soon afterwards, the *Periphyseon* was listed in the first edition of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* [by the Inquisition], and remained on it, until the Index itself was abolished in the 1960s. In the 19th century, Hegel and his followers, interested in the history of philosophy from a systematic point of view, read Eriugena rather uncritically as an absolute idealist and as the father of German idealism. The first critical editions of his major works were not produced until the twentieth century. [...]

The first truly scholarly attempt to establish the facts of his life, his works and influence was by the Belgian scholar Maiul Cappuyns, whose 1933 work *Jean Scot Erigène: sa vie, son oeuvre, sa pensée* is still reliable. Many valuable twentieth-century studies (e.g. Contreni, Marenbon, Schimpf, O'Meara) have explored Eriugena's Carolingian background and continuity with Latin authors. However, systematic studies of his thought (by Beierwaltes, Gersh, Moran) have also recognized him as a highly original metaphysician and speculative thinker of the first rank whose work transcends the limitations of his age and mode of expression. [...]

A conference organized by John O'Meara and Ludwig Bieler in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, in 1970 led to the founding of the Society for the Promotion of Eriugenian Studies (SPES) which has been active in developing Eriugena studies at a high scholarly level by hosting international colloquia and publishing the proceedings.

Toward the close of her work on the great 9th century Catholic philosopher, Carabine notes: "The mark of Eriugena's genius is that his works are finally coming into their own after centuries of neglect and condemnation."

We give the last word to Moran: “Eriugena is an original philosopher who articulates the relation between God and creation in a manner which preserves both divine transcendence and omnipresence. His theory of human nature is rationalist and intellectualist. His theory of place and time as defining structures of the mind anticipates Kant, his dialectical reasoning prefigures Hegel. But above all, Eriugena is a mystic who emphasizes the unity of human nature with God.”

Further Teachings of John Scottus Eriugena

From the *Periphyseon*:

[Creation is God’s emanation from Himself and return toward Himself:] Thus going forth into all things in order He makes all things and is made in all things, and returns to Himself, calling all things back to Himself, and while He is made in all things He does not cease to be above all things. (Periphyseon III.683b)

[On the Divine image manifest as creation:] While by itself and in itself it is immutable and eternally at rest, yet it is said to move all things since all things through it and in its subsist and have been brought from not-being into being, for by its being, all things proceed out of nothing, and it draws all things to itself. (P I.521c)

The Creator of all things has constituted between the participations of the natural orders marvelous and ineffable harmonies by which all things come together into one concord. (P III.630d)

To Him all things are at once present. (P IV.808a)

[God] surpasses every intellect and all sensible and intelligible meanings [and is One] Who is better known by not knowing, of Whom ignorance is true knowledge. (P I.510b)

Matter is nothing else but a certain composition of accidents which proceeds from invisible causes to visible matter.... Whether one call it place or limit or term or definition or circumscription, one and the same thing is denoted, namely the confine of a finite creature.... There is no creature, whether visible or invisible, which is not confined in something within the limits of its proper nature by measure and number and weight.... But God understands that He is in none of those things but recognizes that He [is] above all the orders of nature by reason of the excellence of His wisdom, and below all things by reason of the depth of His power... He alone is the measure without measure, the number without number, the weight without weight. (P I.479b, 483c, II.590a-b)

And if anyone who saw God understood what he saw, it would not be God that he saw but one of those creatures which derive their existence and unknowability from Him. (P V.920c)

He is held to be made in His creatures generally because in them He, without Whom they cannot be, is not only understood to be, but also is their essence.... [But] only He truly exists by Himself, and He alone is everything which in the things that are is truly said to be. (P I.516b, 518a)

No one may draw near Him who does not first, by persevering in the way of thought, abandon all the senses and operations of the intellect, together with the sensibles and everything that is and is not, and, having achieved a state of not-knowing, is restored to the unity—as far as is possible—of Him who is above every essence and understanding.... It is for the very few, wholly detached from earthly thoughts and purged by virtue and knowledge, to know God in these visible creatures. (P I.510c; III.689c-d)

Affirmation is less capable than negation of signifying the ineffable Essence of God, seeing

that by the former one among the created attributes [e.g., goodness, truth, etc.] is transferred to the Creator, whereas by the latter the Creator is conceived in Himself beyond every creature. (P IV.758a)

There is no one of those who devoutly believe and understand the truth who would not persistently and without any hesitation declare that the creative Cause of the whole universe is beyond nature and beyond being and beyond life and wisdom and power and beyond all things which are said and understood and perceived by any sense. (P III.621d-622a)

... being is from Him but He is not Himself being. For above this being after some manner there is More-than-being, and absolute Being beyond language and understanding. (P I.482b; V.898a-c).

[The Scripture] is not to be believed as a book which always uses verbs and nouns in their proper sense when it teaches us about the Divine Nature.... We must follow reason which investigates the truth of things. (P I.509a)

There is no worse death than ignorance of the truth. (P III.650a)

[The soul knows] through her intellect [spiritual knowing capacity] that, from the one Cause of all things, all things start upon their movement towards multiplicity without abandoning the simplicity of the unity by which they subsist in it eternally and immutably, and (return) towards it as the end of their whole movement, and end in it. (P II.578d)

The sound intellect must hold that after the end of this world every nature, whether corporeal or incorporeal, will seem to be only God, while preserving the integrity of its nature, so that even God, Who in Himself is incomprehensible, is after a certain mode comprehended in the creature, while the creature itself by an ineffable miracle is changed into God. (P I.451b)

Just as it passes all intellect how the word of God descends into man so it passes all reason how man ascends into God. (P I.576c)

God created the visible creature to this purpose, that through it, as likewise through the invisible, His glory might abound, and that He might be known ... to be the One Creator of the whole creature, visible and invisible. (P IV.843b)

He is the Cause of all love and is diffused through all things and gathers all things together into one and involves them in Himself in an ineffable Return, and brings to an end in Himself the motions of love of the whole creature. (P I.519d-520a)

For God shall be all in all, and every creature shall be overshadowed, that is, converted to God, as the stars when the sun arises. (P III.689a)



From the *Homilia on the Prologue to the John Gospel*:

The voice of the spiritual eagle [the symbol for John the Evangelist] strikes in the hearing of the Church. May our outer senses grasp its transient sounds and our inner spirit penetrate its enduring meaning. This is the voice of the bird of high flight... that spiritual bird who, on swiftest wings of innermost theology and intuitions of most brilliant and high contemplation, transcends all vision and flies beyond all things that are and are not. By the things that are, I mean the things that do not wholly escape perception, either angelic or human... and by the things that truly are not, I mean those that actually surpass the powers of all understanding. The blessed theologian John therefore flies beyond not only what may be thought and spoken, but also beyond all mind and meaning.... He enters into the very arcanum of the one principle of all.

There he clearly distinguishes the supersubstantial unity and the supersubstantial difference of the beginning and the Word [Logos]—that is, of the Father and the Son—both incomprehensible, and begins his Gospel saying: “In the beginning was the Word.” (1)

O Blessed [Saint] Paul, you were caught up, as you yourself assert, into the third heaven, to paradise; but you were not caught up beyond every heaven and every paradise. John [the evangelist/theologian], however, went beyond every heaven formed and paradise created, beyond every human and angelic nature... [and] heard the one Word through which all things are made. (4)

John, therefore, was not a human being but more than a human being when he flew above himself and all things that are. Transported by the ineffable power of wisdom and by purest keenness of mind, he entered that which is beyond all things: namely, the secret of the single essence in three substances and the three substances in the single essence [i.e., the one, triune God]. He would not have been able to ascend into God if he had not first [by Divine Grace] become God. (5)

Only where eternity is known may immutable truth be understood. (6)

Through the very God-Word, all things were made.... The generation of the Word from the Father is the very creation itself of all causes.... Hear, then, the divine and ineffable paradox—the unopenable secret, the invisible depth, the incomprehensible mystery! Through Him [the Son or Word/Logos], who was not made but begotten, all things were made but not begotten. The beginning, the principle, from whom all things are is the Father; the beginning, the principle, through whom all things exist is the Son. The Father speaks His Word—the Father brings forth His Wisdom—and all things are made.... The Father’s heart is His own substance, of which the Son’s own substance was begotten. (7)

The substance of those things, which are made by Him, began in Him before all the ages of the world, not in time but with time. Time, indeed, is made with all things that are made.... It is co-created with them. (7) [Note that Eriugena’s idea here of non-absolute time has been vindicated by modern theoretical physics, which no longer treats time, space or matter as absolute, but as relative, coming into being with the emergence of the universe out of nothing.]

Lest you hold [like the Manicheans, Gnostics, and others, whom Eriugena criticizes in ch. 18] that among those things that are, some were made by the very Word of God himself, while others in fact were made, or existed, outside of Him [by some demi-god or Satan]... the Evangelist adds to all his previous theology the conclusion: “And without Him was not anything made that was made.” That is: nothing was made without Him, because He Himself circumscribes and comprehends all... [leaving] nothing whatsoever that is not made in and through Him.” (8)

All things that are made in Him, in Him are life and are one. All things were—subsist—in Him as causes before they are in themselves as effects. (9)

All things, therefore, that were made by the Word, live in Him unchangeably and are life. In him all things exist neither by temporal intervals or places, nor as what is to come; but all are one in Him, above all times and places, and subsist in him eternally.... Even what seems to us to be without all vitality [e.g., stones, gases, stars] lives in the Word.... “For in Him,” as Sacred Scripture says, “We live, move and have our being.” Truly, as the great [pseudo-]Dionysius the Aeropagite says, “The being of all things is their supersubstantial divinity.” (10)

Observe the forms and beauties of sensible things, and comprehend the Word of God in them. If you do so, the truth will reveal to you in all such things only He who made them, outside of Whom you have nothing to contemplate, for He Himself is all things. For whatever truly is, in all things that are, is He. Indeed, just as no substantial good exists outside of Him, so no essence or substance exists that is not He.... The light of humanity [and all things], therefore, is

our Lord Christ Jesus.... (11)

Human nature, even if it had not sinned, would have been unable to shine by its own strength; for human nature is not naturally light, but only participates in the light.... Our nature, considered in itself, is a substance of darkness, but is able to receive the light of wisdom.... It is not you who shine, but the Spirit of your Father shines in you.... God surpasses all meaning and intelligence, and alone possesses immortality. Whose light is called darkness by virtue of its excellence, since no creature can comprehend either what or how it is. (13) [Note some similarities here with the ancient Indian philosophy which regards only the Self-shining Person/Purusha as truly living and conscious; all creation is inert/jada but for this animating, enlivening, enlightening Presence.]

No creature, either rational or intellectual, is in itself substantially light, but participates in the one true substantial Light that shines intelligibly everywhere and in all things.... He is the true Light who said of Himself, “I am the light of the world; he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” (16)

Ceasing to be children of [mere] human beings and beginning to be children of God, they [the spiritually regenerated] leave behind them the world of vices, destroying these in themselves, holding before their mental eyes the world of virtues, longing with all their strength to ascend there. Thus the true Light illumines those who enter this world of virtue, not those who flee into the world of vices. (17)

To those who received Him, He gave the power to become sons of God.... For the possibility of believing in the Son of God and of becoming a son of God is denied to no one—for this is made of the human will, together with the cooperation of divine Grace. (20)

In case you are tempted to say that it is impossible that mortals should become immortals, that corruptible beings should become free of corruption, that simple human beings should become sons of God, and that temporal creatures should possess eternity... accept the argument that faith prepares for what you doubt.... Why is it astonishing that a human being who believes in the Son of God should become a son of God. For this very purpose, indeed, the Word descended into flesh: that in him the flesh—the human being—... might ascend; that, through him who was the only begotten Son by nature, many might become sons by adoption.... Alone He came down; but with many he goes up. He, who from God made himself a human being, makes gods from human beings. (21)

He is the greatest and principal example of the grace by which, without any preceeding merits, a human being becomes God.... To Him be glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for now and evermore. Amen. (23)



Additional miscellaneous teachings from Eriugena:

Truly, to whatever extent one of the faithful delights in what is received through the senses—to that extent he must be reckoned among the beasts. If, on the contrary, living and growing in both action [virtue] and knowledge, he is nourished by spiritual food—then he is no longer to be numbered among the beasts, but may be counted among rational creatures.... But no one would know how to rise to heights of virtue and contemplation if he were not first fed by tokens of sensible things.... But by these they [the faithful] cannot be nourished until they have transcended their corporeal senses and all that they have received through them. [From Eriugena’s unfinished Commentary on Gospel of St. John]

The word “deification” is rarely found in Latin books, but its meaning is found in many authors, especially Ambrose. Perhaps it is that the meaning of the word theosis, commonly used by the

Greeks, to signify the passing of saints into God not only in soul but also in body, when nothing animal, corporeal, human or natural remains in them—perhaps, I say, to those unable to rise above carnal thoughts it seems too lofty, incomprehensible and incredible, and hence not to be proclaimed in public.... [Yet,] Just as each and everything, whether sensible or intelligible, is naturally compelled to return to its beginnings, so human nature will also return to its beginning, which is nothing other than God's Word, in which it was made, and unchangeably subsists and lives.

The Father is light, fire, heat; the Son is light, fire, heat; and the Holy Spirit is light, fire, heat.... They consume our sins together, and by theosis—that is, by deification—they convert us as though we were a holocaust [sacred offering on the ancient Israelite altar], into their unity.

Our mortal bodies will be transformed not only into spiritual bodies but actually into our souls, because natural necessity prescribes that just as a rational soul made in God's image is to return to Him in whose image and likeness it is, so the body too, made in the image of the soul and, as it were, the image of the image, will, when freed from all earthly weight and corporeality, be returned to its cause, the soul; and through it, as a kind of mean, it will be turned into the unique Cause of all things.¹⁰

Endnotes

1 Note that our 9th century John Scottus Eriugena is not to be confused with the 13th century Franciscan, John Duns Scotus.

On Eriugena, see Dermot Moran's exceptionally fine article (Oct. 2004), "John Scottus Eriugena," written for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scottus-eriugena/>. And see his fuller treatment, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989; and Moran's articles, "Pantheism [sic—see my text on how Eriugena, et al. are panentheists, not pantheists] from John Scottus Eriugena to Nicholas of Cusa," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. LXIV No. 1 (Winter, 1990): 131-152; "Origen and Eriugena: Aspects of Christian Gnosis," in *The Relationship Between Neoplatonism and Christianity* (T. Finan & V. Twomey, Eds.), Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992; and "Idealism in Medieval Philosophy: The Case of Johannes Scottus Eriugena," in *Medieval Philosophy & Theology*, 8 (1999): 53-82.

See Deirdre Carabine, *John Scottus Eriugena*, Oxford U. Press, 2000 (see also her book, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena*, W.B. Eerdsman, 1995).

Other fine English-language works include: John O'Meara, *Eriugena*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988 (the late O'Meara founded the Society for the Promotion of Eriugenian Studies [SPES]); Willemien Otten, *The Anthropology of Johannes Scottus Eriugena*, Leiden: Brill, 1991; Bernard McGinn & Willemien Otten (Eds.), *Eriugena: East & West*, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame U Press, 1994; I.P. Sheldon-Williams, "The Greek Platonist Tradition from the Cappadocians to Maximus and Eriugena," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek & Early Medieval Thought* (A.H. Armstrong, Ed.), Cambridge U., 1970; James McEvoy & Michael Dunne (Eds.), *History & Eschatology in John Scottus Eriugena and His Time: Proceedings of the Tenth International Conference for the Promotion of Eriugenian Studies*, Maynooth & Dublin, August 16-20, 2000, Leuven: Leuven U. Press, 2002; Gerd Van Riel, Carlos Steel & James McEvoy (Eds.), *Johannes Scottus Eriugena: The Bible & Hermeneutics: Proceedings of the Ninth International Colloquium of the SPES*, Leuven & Louvain-La-Neuve, June 7-10, 1995, Leuven U., 1996.

Eriugena is profiled in standard history-of-philosophy texts, e.g., Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (1960); G.G. Coulton, *Studies in Medieval Thought* (1940); F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Bk. I, vol. II, Augustine to Scotus, NY: Image Books/Doubleday, 1985, pp. 112-135; M. DeWulf, *History of Medieval Philosophy*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1935, pp. 121-35.

Eriugena's major work, *Periphyseon*, is available in two English translations: I.P. Sheldon-Williams, & J.J. O'Meara (Tr.) *Eriugena: Periphyseon (The Division of Nature)*, Montreal/Paris: Bellarmin, 1987; Myra Uhlfelder & J. Potter (Tr.), *John the Scot: Periphyseon*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976. (Note: Édouard Jeuneau completed in 2003 a critically acclaimed, revised edition of the Latin text, which will be the basis of all subsequent scholarly translations; Jeuneau sleuthed out which margin notes were by Eriugena and has included them.)

For some of Eriugena's other work, see Mary Brennan (Tr.), *John Scottus Eriugena: Treatise on Divine Predestination*, U. of Notre Dame Press, 1998; and Christopher Bamford, *The Voice of the Eagle: The Heart of Celtic Christianity*, Rochester, VT: Lindisfarne rev. ed., 2000 (has a good translation of

Eriugena's Homily on the Prologue to the Gospel of St. John, as well as selections from Eriugena's other works included throughout Bamford's long commentary).

2. Deirdre Carabine, *John Scottus Eriugena*, op. cit., pp. 32-3.

3. In Peter Morrell, "Johannes Scotus Erigena, John the Scot/Irish," January 1997, at www.trincoll.edu/depts/phil/philo/phils/scotus.html. For these other cited assessments of Eriugena, see Catholic historian Philip Hughes: *A History of the Church*, NY: Sheed & Ward, 1935, p. 196. Richard Woods, *Christian Spirituality: God's Presence through the Ages*, Orbis rev. ed., 2006, p. 106.

4. Carabine, p. 13.

5. Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Doubleday Anchor, 1995, pp. 208-210.

6. Carabine, pp. 21-2, 25.

7. Christopher Bamford, *The Voice of the Eagle*, op. cit., p. 58.

8. Carabine, pp. 61-3.

9. Anonymous, "Johannes Scotus Erigena," at the online NNDB data-base, www.nndb.com/people/756/000095471.

10. Quoted in C. Bamford, op. cit., pp. 203, 210-1, 214-5, 317.